
An Open Letter to Supporters of the Iraq War About Ron Paul

Why the Debate Matters

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Abstract

This article talks about the Iraq War debate from the point of view of a conservative Republican in support of a Republican candidate, concern for long-term national defense, and a rational foreign policy. A broad case for orderly redeployment is made militarily, politically, and economically, starting with why the debate is necessary and patriotic to begin with.

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Preface

In the political debate leading up to the presidential election, supporters of the Iraq War and current military intervention in general often accuse war opponents of being unpatriotic, “against victory”, and not “supporting the troops,” among other things. These arguments often target “liberal hippie anti-war Democrats,” or somesuch, but the same arguments could also be taken as insulting by conservative Republicans like myself concerned about national defense and supporters of the Republican presidential candidate who receives the most donations from active military personnel: Doctor, former Air Force Flight Surgeon, and Congressman Ron Paul. In this essay, I discuss the multiple levels of reasoning for redeployment from Iraq, starting with why the conversation itself is necessary and ending by underlining that the current conflict(s) are not the only critical issues facing our country right now.

The War Question

The term *anti-war* is not useful to this discussion since it equally applies to most readers targetted by this essay. I have yet to meet anyone, including in the Pentagon, who is *pro-war*. We merely differ on when war is necessary to our security as a nation and when it is not. Once this is acknowledged, discussion of the merits of any particular war is a natural and crucial step. Dr. Paul was actually one of the first in Congress to offer a resolution for use of force against Al Qaeda post 9/11; he simply suggested a very different way of going about it. Perhaps the debacle of the last four years have proved him right: our soldiers, sacrificing for our country, should never be committed to battle without care, consideration, and due dilligence.

It is often said that wars are those things where the old send the young to die. Indeed, the prevailing view among the career military I worked with was that wars resulted when the State Department screwed up; it is the job of our armed forces to clean up the mess and come home quickly. When I presented at the 66th Military Operations Research Society Symposium (MORSS), I attended a session on Operations Other Than War (OOTW), including long term occupations, peace keeping, and police actions. Views of OOTW among the military range from deep concern to something approaching terror. It is simply not the proper role of a soldier to fight civilians, women, and children whom they cannot tell friend from foe.

The idea that we may not discuss the merits of a war while it is in progress because it “empowers the enemy” is simply not workable in our system of government. Because (ethical) wars are not an end in and of themselves, they are inevitably political. If a war has no political element then it has no reason to be fought and that in and of itself is enough to make it criminal both to our “enemies” and our armed forces. Political micromanagement of a war is never advisable, but the discussion of whether a military action has merit, of whether its goals are being met, and whether its goals are in fact meetable, must happen. Our political system requires open discussion to function. There is no other way to do it short of burning our Constitution and reverting to the monarchy we fought to rid ourselves of and our soldiers have died over generations to keep from ever returning. My grandfather fought in two world wars, lying about his age both times, because some things are simply worth everything to preserve.

Given these principles, I would hope that the reader will at least consider my arguments. I do not have all of the answers: no one does. These arguments are of course slanted by the purpose of this essay and some statement may be made against them. It is quite possible, however, that only one compelling argument is sufficient to morally seek an end to the conflict and that the existence of a number of arguable issues is sufficient merely to accept a candidate based on the large number of issues facing our country beyond the Iraq conflict. Given that *anti-war* is a false label and only truly applies to a relatively small radical movement that is truly against a strong National Defense, I will use the short hand *opponents* or *opponents of the conflict* for people seeking a withdrawal from Iraq and *supporters* for those in favor of “staying the course”. I will also discuss the differences between the terms *isolationist* and *non-interventionist* as this is crucial to an understanding of foreign military and economic policy.

Success and Failure

First, I must deal with the argument that opponents of the conflict are “against success” or “want us to lose” and that success damages the position of opponents. Perhaps this is true politically but not morally. Morally, success or failure is largely irrelevant to the discussion. One cannot be ashamed of or even care about one's country's actions without loving it and the people who dedicate their lives to it. Dissent is an act of patriotism and one of the founding virtues of our nation.

Mexico has a corrupt government, the country is riddled with organized crime, and the constant stream of economic and political refugees across our border is certainly a threat to national security. Pakistan underwent a military coup, Al Qaeda and the Taliban are hiding within its borders, political suppression and violence is common, and they have nuclear weapons. Qatar is known to be sheltering Al Qaeda and

Hamas. Saudi Arabia has a regime more religiously oppressive than Iraq ever was (Iraq's government was largely secular, women attended university and did not wear burkas). Most of the 9/11 terrorists were Saudi Arabians, including Osama Bin Laden himself (a member of the royal family). Burma just slaughtered thousands of monks in a peaceful protest to support its military dictatorship. We have not invaded these countries, some of them are in fact allies in the Iraq conflict and we provide military support to them, just as we did to Iraq and Afghanistan in the past.

China is a communist country where Christianity is outlawed, political speech is denied, military buildup (nuclear and conventional) is accelerating. Saudi Arabia and China are favored trading partners and creditors to underwrite our "War on Terror". I would not likely support invading any of these countries whether successful or not. Deploying our military in one country means ignoring others and even arming future enemies to support that one operation. Success may often be a losing proposition and the full costs of action or inaction must be weighed.

There is also the argument that current progress in Iraq is a sign that "stay the course" was a good choice and is therefore still a good choice. A reduction in violence is hopeful and is certainly to be wished for, but does not negate longer term issues. First of all, current progress does not cancel the costs to get there, including the fact that we created that violence in the first place. Second, the improvement, if attributable to the surge in troop levels, may go away when levels are reduced again as they soon must be. Personally, I hope that the decreases are more the result of Iraqis fed up with the sectarian violence and beginning to work together, not just temporarily, but in the long haul as well.

Either way, the situation is still highly unstable and violence has gone from insane levels to merely unacceptably high. Imagine three car bombings in two days in one of our major cities, plus multiple nightly political killings (police, magistrates, officials, etc.) Society, on the local and regional level, would grind to a halt just as it has there. Outside the largely independent Kurdish territory, crime, including organized crime, is out of control, the judiciary largely fails to function, families and neighborhoods are armed for self-protection, and unemployment is still above 50%. There is no water, sewage, or electricity in much of the country due to destruction of infrastructure. The national government is deadlocked by sectarian interests and functions no better.

This all may, and hopefully will, continue to improve, but if it does, it will come largely from the Iraqi people deciding to work together. Our presence may do little and may hinder in many respects. Recently, our helicopter gunships mistakenly slaughtered an Iraqi neighborhood militia which was coordinating with Iraqi police to root out an Al Qaeda cell. The worst part of it is that this militia was composed of both Sunnis and Shiites who had banded together to fight their common foe. Now their families have a different common enemy: us. I recently read an account by an Iraq war veteran that, in a combined operation between US and Iraqi personnel, the US commander (for perhaps valid tactical reasons) summarily ordered the Iraqi force, commanded by their equivalent of a Major-General, to get out of the way, fueling resentment. As foreigners, we wear a mask of illegitimacy and are held to an artificially high bar. Our presence, *especially* when it helps, rubs salt in wounds.

Given the dysfunctionality of the government, the instability of the situation on the street, unrest due to crumbling infrastructure, threats to our staging areas in Pakistan and Turkey, including a foreign army massed on the border, the possibility of outright secession by the Kurds along with most of Iraq's wealth and industry, growing logistical and training problems, longer and more frequent deployments, and degenerating diplomacy with Iran (and therefore Syria), the situation can degrade, possibly rapidly, at any time. It would take up to two years to withdraw from the region due to the large amount of hardware emplaced, and a rapid redeployment in response to a collapse would leave much of our materiel, if not scattered personnel, behind, routing a large fraction of our global forces. Our troops have been asked to do too much for too long with too little. The fact that they have done so speaks volumes about their courage, skill, and dedication, but it is folly to leave them critically exposed. We learned the hard way in World War II the danger of over-long deployments even when morale is high and soldiers are dedicated. Tired soldiers make mistakes; mistakes result in deaths. That experience informed the modern military doctrine we are now completely ignoring.

This conflict has been a series of critical failures by our soldiers' leadership. If the administration happens to find a miracle and our butts are not handed to us, it is not for lack of trying. Worse yet, the attempt to continue to prop up the Iraq operation distracts effort from increasing problems in Afghanistan. By trying to do everything, we may succeed at nothing or win one minor victory to fail where it really matters.

Besides, why all of this talk about "surrender" and "turning tail?" Our stated objectives have been met: Saddam Hussein is gone, there are no Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the Iraqis have an elected, Constitutional government. Declare victory and go home. Let the Iraqis, a sovereign nation, decide their future.

Origins of War and Responsibility

Whatever one may *conclude* about how we started the war, it cannot be denied that there are serious *arguments* on this aspect. Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction that we have found and initial intelligence did not especially point that way. There were no links to Al Qaeda, not just because we found none, but because the Sunni-Bathist power structure in Iraq had deep religious disagreements with Al-Qaeda. Saddam Hussein was a dictator, but we largely put him there and there were and are much worse countries on that record.

An argument by supporters is that, whether or not the war was moral in the first place, having toppled the government in Iraq, we now have a responsibility to see things through. I must admit I find this argument quite compelling. I do, however, think it is now impracticable. Iraq is at the point where Iraqis must decide their future if their system of government is to be seen as legitimate and if their sectarian differences are to be set aside long enough to form a workable nation. They may or may not succeed, but I think that *our* abilities are limited. Imposed *free* governments are seldom stable: the Weimar Republic in Germany prior to World War II and Thieu's government in Vietnam are just two examples. Japan is a good counter-example, but the problem was approached much differently, much of the original government structure remained intact, planning started long before Japan's surrender, and the Japanese themselves decided that their taste for war was over. Iraqis must take responsibility for their own future. The fact that we have little power over this should be a lesson for the next time we are so eager to intervene.

Given that a full withdrawal will take a few years if we start today, the necessary gradual redeployments offer time for an organized hand-off. If we start later, we get our troops back still later, if it does not turn into another Korea and we never get our troops back at all.

What about reconstruction? Surely we owe them at least that much. Perhaps we do, and as I have said, the "we owe them" argument is the one that gains the most ground with me, but again, the problem is intractable. Due to constant violence and corruption, both among Iraqis and our own contractors, very little of the reconstruction money has been effective. Public infrastructure has been destroyed as fast as it can be built. Most of it is well below pre-war levels. Iraq, an oil rich nation, must *import* fuel because of the lack of refining and processing facilities. Water, sewage, electricity, trash collection, medicine, and so forth are at desperate levels and relief efforts are ineffective. Our attempts to rebuild their economy have failed to stem unemployment. Violence and lack of electricity prevents most businesses from functioning and the equipment we have shipped there sits idle. Contractors are growing fat on Iraq contracts while our own bridges rust. Weapons, cash, and equipment we have supplied to rebuild their police and military have vanished at an alarming rate. Tens of thousands of firearms are thought to have gotten into the wrong hands along with communications equipment, uniforms, vehicles, and body armor.

Perhaps we can (and should) help Iraq rebuild in the future, but now is not the time. The definition of insanity is trying the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results. They need to stabilize their government, reduce corruption, and stem violence before anything meaningful can happen. Besides, I have always felt that private relief efforts are more effective and less corrupt than government intervention. I have a problem with *charity* seized involuntarily from people; if you believe strongly in Iraq reconstruction, donate or go volunteer. Perhaps I will join you, but I will not take money from my neighbor to salve my conscience.

The Price of Withdrawal

Supporters say that Iraq will collapse if we withdraw now and the conflict will become regional. Perhaps it will. Iraq may get worse, maybe much worse if we leave; opponents of the conflict must accept that. It may also escalate if and maybe even *because* we stay. Our presence in the region galvanizes opposition as much as anything else. The Iraq war is practically a recruiting poster for Al Qaeda and may very well be responsible for the increasing violence in Pakistan. Right now, if Iraq collapses or the conflict becomes regional, our troops are scattered, cannot readily withdraw, are not sufficient for total martial law, and cannot both maintain civil order and fight off an invader from Turkey, Syria, or Iran, especially if we lose one or more regional staging areas and logistics are endangered.

Strategically, our rear is inexcusably threatened. We cannot redeploy our forces immediately. Switching to a hand-off and containment mode while withdrawing will secure our position and leave us in a position to still act in some fashion if we decide we need to. In the meantime, we can start to rest, resupply, and refresh our depleted forces.

OK, but we are "fighting them there so we don't fight them here?" I really cannot accept this idea as plausible. We have not had a recent terror attack because terror attacks are historically rare. The current span of time is in no way unusual and is not necessarily a sign of any particular success. Evidence suggests that our presence in the Middle East is driving extremism right now and, of course, not all extremists are Muslim. Heard of Timothy McVeigh? Of budding anti-American sentiment in South America? In the meantime, we have a wide open border which anyone could march an army of terrorists across in the dead of night. Our armed forces should be protecting us here, not there. Reagan's Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, warned of the possibility of skirmishes with Mexican militaristic elements at a time when we become militarily and economically tied down in the Middle East. Normally something like that would be a laughable threat. Right now, an army of Mongol horsemen could invade from the south and wreak havoc.

The whole idea that we must "beat them" at any cost is a bit paranoid and irrational. Who is the "them" we should be wiping out indiscriminantly? It is a sectarian conflict. Should we wipe out the Shiites, the Sunnis, the Bathists, the Kurds, the people who want Americans to go home, the small number of Episcopalian Christians? What about their women and children? Just go door to door shooting? Al Qaeda is only a small part of the picture and, unfortunately, an Al Qaeda supporter, a Shiite, a Kurd, and a Sunni, and so forth, all look the same. A child with a coffee can and a child with a bomb look the same too, as one of my relatives discovered in a jeep in Southeast Asia.

Tough Choices; Economics and Power Projection

Even if moral arguments in support of the war hold in some fashion, there is still the question of "can we maintain it?" This is not so much a victory/defeat question as a strategic and economic one. Remaining in Iraq means not being elsewhere. Spending on Iraq means not spending elsewhere. Our military preparedness globally and at home is suffering terribly. China's military spending is increasing rapidly even though it is *remaining the same* as a percentage of their economy. Our military spending is an increasing percentage of an increasingly troubled economy.

In World War II we were a military powerhouse in large part because we were an industrial powerhouse. We mined most of our copper, lead, iron, drilled most of our oil, made our own tanks and guns. We even made simple things like ball bearings, surprisingly critical to any army, especially a modern one, but no longer manufactured at home. Instead, we buy these things abroad, including more and more electronics, with a weakening dollar.

Our country's infrastructure is in desperate straits. We are falling behind in education and skilled labor. Many, perhaps most skilled labor jobs are now going or have already gone overseas. We have a veritable

flood of illegal immigrants across a wide open border. We have no National Guard to deal with emergencies at home. We have a deficit increasing by \$1 trillion a year and it grows faster every year. We are facing the distinct possibility that OPEC may shift away from using the dollar for oil transactions, which would plunge our currency into freefall. At the same time, plans are going forward for more emergency appropriations for Iraq and Afghanistan, for another 120,000 soldiers over the next couple of years, at higher pay and recruitment bonuses, more border security since our military is not here to do the job, and increases in FEMA to take over some of the National Guard's traditional duties. Something must give, and it will, at some point, be the war in Iraq. It is much better to do it intentionally and under some control than for it to suddenly collapse.

Honesty: Dedication and Sacrifice

I would have much more respect for the supporters' position if they felt and said the war was so necessary that we needed to buckle down as a country and sacrifice to maintain it, reinstitute the draft, raise taxes, collect soda bottles to make body armor, and cut entitlement programs to the bone. War is easy when only a small number must sacrifice. Personally, the fact that my military work would not have resulted in my death but that someone else's family would get a letter and a visit from someone in a full dress uniform ate at me. I cannot see how anyone else can stand to do it. I would rather get shot at.

Our military has paid the cost not just in dead, but in tens of thousands of wounded, due to the combined wonders of body armor and advanced trauma care, many horribly maimed or suffering from head trauma, and a frightenly high suicide rate, four times that of the general population and more than twice that of veterans from previous wars. Are we really willing to ask them to continue bearing that cost? Are we willing to sacrifice in kind?

I would question the sanity and necessity of such a national commitment to the war, but at least the position would be honest and consistent. Otherwise, it seems to be an unwillingness to accept that we simply cannot do everything, that, at some point, we must take the lumps for the past decade or two's mistakes, lick our wounds, and rebuild. Dr. Paul and a few others at least admit the necessity of that choice and the stark reality which drives it. If we are to rebuild our military and our National Defense, let alone face any of our other problems, we must pull back from many of our military actions and commitments abroad, at least for the mid-term, to consolidate and rebuild. As just one example, we are still heavily invested in South Korea, even though they have a \$900 billion dollar economy and North Korea's economy is crumbling. Isn't it time for them to take more responsibility? Will our grandchildren be *safeguarding* Iraq? I hope not.

Getting the Job Done; Supporting the Troops

Some of our leaders are fond of saying that our soldiers want to "get the job done." Some of our soldiers no doubt feel that way, and I have spoken to some few who do, but I seriously doubt our leaders would know. If you have served in the military, you know exactly what I mean:

When I was in the Pentagon, a General visited our vault for an inspection. I was a technical team lead working in what had been a broom closet days before with two other people and five computers. The bare bulb in the ceiling was still there and the door locked from the outside. The recycling bin had been removed from the break room due to a nest of brown recluse spiders, and a power outage (1950's wiring) that week had left us stuck in the dark facility for close to an hour. When you are lined up for inspection, the colonel tells you to be on your best behavior, and the big cheese steps up to you and asks "How do you like the job you're doing here, Son?" what do you say? I know what I said.

I've done it, you've done it, they do it, and then they go back to their barracks, log onto the Internet, and donate to Ron Paul's campaign. Our soldiers care, they follow their orders, and they do their jobs. That does not mean they like it or believe in their particular orders. They are just disciplined enough not to say it.

Non-Interventionism in Foreign Policy

There is a large difference between the accusations of *isolationist* which go around and the principle of *non-interventionist* which has gone by the wayside in our country. An *isolationist* is someone who sticks their head in the sand. A *non-interventionist* is someone who respects other countries sovereignty as we expect them to respect ours, that believes in national defense, not offense, that intervention should be considered a last resort and a surgical effort. A non-interventionist policy includes strong trade-relations, treaties, negotiation from strength, talking softly and carrying a big stick, and generally trying to make sure intervention does not *become* necessary.

Ron Paul is lambasted for considering talking to Iran and Al Qaeda. A statesman always talks to enemies; it is the only way to learn about them. Ronald Reagan's opening of discussions with the Kremlin paved the way for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Among other things, we had been demonized by the Soviet Leadership of reacting out of fear of them. When we showed we were willing to talk frankly but not willing to capitulate, that propaganda evaporated. Our strength of character and leadership emphasized their weakness.

Our founders warned heavily against entanglement in foreign affairs and foreign wars, against trying to spread freedom at the point of a gun. World War I was started by a complex system of alliances pulling countries into a fight no one really wanted. A dash of professional detachment goes a long way to avoiding costly bloodbaths.

Conclusion and Going Forward

Someday I want to be able to say to my daughter that I did everything I could to hand her a country worth living and believing in, where she can live according to her conscience and keep a good bit of what she earns for herself, supporting the charities and causes of her own choice, not the ones she is forced to. That includes trying to spread this message and open this debate as much as I can.

Very few Americans participate in the primary process. The primaries are where our real choice begins. Otherwise, we do not really have any debate in the elections, any real choices beyond the "best of evils". There are issues with the war and issues bigger than the war that need to be heard. As such, it is critical to get someone into the election that is not more-of-the-same that has gotten us into our current mess. We need someone who seriously examines issues, is not afraid to take an unpopular stand or address difficult questions, who is willing to compromise on issues, but not on fundamental principles of our law and system of government.

Let us have a real debate as a people about who we want to be and walk forward with our eyes open. We are a country born of high ideals and lofty principles. Let us show the world that they still mean something to us, that greatness comes not from arrogance and rhetoric, but from humility and character. Support Ron Paul in the Republican Primary and help to end the conflict in Iraq.