

Still Choosing between Bad and Worse in Iraq

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When an apologist for the Bush administration or [partisan Republicans](#) argue that President Obama is making a mistake by planning to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq in the coming months it can be ignored as rhetoric or vitriol. However, when somebody like Tom Ricks, who has written extensively and thoughtfully about the war since its inception [arrives at a similar conclusion](#), it should be considered more seriously.

Ricks essentially argues that sticking to the timeline for withdrawing troops from Iraq which Obama presented early in 2009, of pulling out 10,000 troops a month beginning around May, would be a mistake and endanger whatever progress is being made in Iraq this year, particularly around the elections. Ricks is concerned that if this plan is implemented “just as Iraqi political leaders are struggling to form a new government, American military leaders will be distracted by the myriad tasks of supervising major troop movements. On top of that, the deeper the troop withdrawals go, the more potentially destabilizing they will be.”

Ricks’ analysis exposes, and reflects, one of the fundamental truths about U.S. involvement in Iraq since the fall of Baghdad — withdrawing today will be very, very difficult, but withdrawing tomorrow will be harder; and, of course, withdrawing the day after tomorrow will be harder still. This is a very disempowering situation as there is no good time to withdraw and postponing decisions, or action, only makes it worse.

This easily leads to the conclusion that the U.S. should have begun withdrawing troops years ago. However, at no given moment was it a good time to do this. It also leads to the more obvious conclusion that the U.S. should not have walked so cavalierly into this war in 2003, but neither of these conclusions are useful now. One lesson which can be drawn is that waiting for the right time to withdraw troops from Iraq is not a realistic option. There are no good times to withdraw, only bad or worse times. Because of this circumstance, at any given moment a good argument, like the one Ricks made, can be made against withdrawing. Accordingly, there will be no moment in 2011 or 2012, just as there was no moment in 2007 or 2008, when withdrawing from Iraq will be easy and will not jeopardize whatever gains have been made, or are about to be made there.

Thus, at any given moment, the best option is to begin withdrawing troops from Iraq, but because there are always such immediate and negative consequences for doing that, it is easy to postpone this decision. Another possible option would be to recognize that the effort in Iraq cannot realistically be achieved in a few more months or years and to prepare for a longer commitment in Iraq or as Ricks puts it “30,000 to 50,000 United States service members in Iraq for many years to come.” This approach is also flawed because even a longer commitment would be far from a guarantee of success and because it is hard to imagine the American people supporting an essentially open-ended

commitment in Iraq that could be measured in decades, not months, As Ricks' analysis shows, perhaps inadvertently, while the decision in Iraq is not easy, it is clear.