

Iraq – The Case for “Cut and Walk”

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“A nation has prestige according to its merits. America's contribution to world civilization must be more than a continuous performance demonstration that we can police the planet.”

-- **Eugene McCarthy, The Limits of Power, 1967**

“A nation should not send half a million military personnel to a distant continent or stake its international standing and domestic cohesion unless its leaders are in a position to describe victory. This implies a definition of attainable political goals and a realistic strategy to achieve them.”

-- **Henry Kissinger, Ending the Vietnam War, 2003**

Back in the days when fixed exchange rates were the order of the day, Citibank's former CEO, **Walter Wriston**, had a very simple rule for deciding when to short a country's currency -- whenever a Finance Minister reassured investors that under no circumstances whatsoever would the country's currency ever be devalued.

One wishes that a similar rule applied to US military misadventures. Perhaps it does, but with a much longer time lag.

In the investment world, of course, the cardinal rule is to “cut one's losses.” Recently, however, a growing number of US politicians, senior officials and pundits on all sides of the political spectrum have counseled us to do precisely the opposite in Iraq.

Despite the many recent setbacks, and the evident lack of any clear strategy, they've repeatedly warned about the perils of “**cutting and**

running." This is as if a **precipitate withdrawal** were the only conceivable alternative to the **open-ended military occupation** that the Bush and Blair Administrations and the would-be Kerry Administration are all promising to maintain even after June 30th.

Ironically, public opinion is far ahead of these politicians, and much more consistent with the "cut your losses" strategy. Right now, [just 45 percent of US adults](#) still believe that it was "worth going to war in Iraq," down from 76 percent a year ago. A majority in the US and [66 percent in the UK](#) now oppose sending any additional troops to Iraq, and fully [40 percent of US adults](#) and [55 percent of UK adults](#) now support a **withdrawal** of US and/or UK troops after the handover of power to the interim Iraqi Government on June 30.

This is comparable to the [level of popular US opposition](#) to the Vietnam War that prevailed immediately after the January 1968 Tet offensive. Of course the vast majority of the Iraqi people have favored the withdrawal of Coalition forces for some time.

In fact there is a clear alternative to the current "prolonged occupation" strategy. As explained below, this **"cut and walk"** strategy has many advantages.

WHERE'S OUR BOBBY?

Despite these strong public sentiments, one searches in vain for any mainstream American political leaders, other than **Dennis Kucinich** and **Ralph Nader**, who are prepared to insist on a definite timetable for a withdrawal of US troops. In other words, with respect to the Vietnam War, we're missing our Robert Kennedy, our Eugene McCarthy, and our Martin Luther King.

In the UK, a few daring military and [political leaders](#) are beginning to catch up to public opinion and advocate a more rapid exit. Even there, however, the alternative to the status quo is often described rather pejoratively and unimaginatively as **"cut and run."**

This "muy macho" lingo was used in early May by Australia's Prime Minister **John Howard**, who vowed that Australia's troops in Iraq would not ["cut and run,"](#) despite the [unpopularity of this position](#). It was also used by the UK's **Tony Blair** on May 17. Ignoring the [mounting political crisis](#) that he faces over the war, Blair repeated at

least three times that under no circumstances would the UK ["cut and run."](#)

President Bush, whose political fortunes are also [flagging](#), has also recently issued a crescendo of assurances that he will not ["cut and run"](#) from Iraq. The first assurance was given last November, when Iraqi resistance started to take off, and it was repeated in [March](#), [April](#), and again on [May 10](#). Every time the President repeated it, more and more people had doubts about whether he really meant it.

Some pro-war pundits have also become fond of the "cut and run" formulation. The **Wall Street Journal's** arch-conservative Deputy Editor **George Melloan** warned in May that "those who counsel a **"cut and run"** solution to the problems of Iraq are kidding themselves." This echoed a November WSJ Op-Ed Page piece entitled ["Don't Cut and Run,"](#) and another one last July by Paul Gigot that proclaimed that "The Iraqis' greatest fear is that America will [cut and run.](#)"

Of course the truth, as indicated by Iraqi polls, is that most Iraqis would probably be delighted if they woke up one morning to find us gone.

Many Democrats who support the war have also been using the "cut and run" formula as a convenient way to avoid serious discussion of alternatives. Among the leading practitioners on this side of the isle is [John](#) Kerry. As early as September 2003, with respect to Iraq, Kerry promised that "We're not going to [cut and run](#) and not do the job." In November he said, "I know we have to win. I don't want to [cut and run.](#)" In December, in an "attack from the right" speech before the Council on Foreign Relations, he warned that the Bush Administration itself might be on the verge of a ["cut and run."](#) In April, annoyed by anti-war critics, Kerry insisted that "...The vast majority of the American people understand that it's important to not just [cut and run.](#) I don't believe in a **cut-and-run philosophy** (sic)."

Similarly, **Joe Biden**, the ranking Democrat on the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, recently warned that "To succumb to political pressure and [cut and run](#) would be a catastrophe for U.S. interests." Similarly, **Joe Lieberman**: "We simply cannot lose. We can't [cut and run,](#)" and again: "...America [cannot cut and run](#) from Iraq. Both parties and both Presidential candidates agree that we should send more troops..." Similarly, Indiana's **Evan Bayh**, who'd love to be Kerry's VP: "We can't [cut and run...](#)" Similarly, New York **Senator Chuck Schumer**, commenting on the killing of a US citizen

in Iraq: "If they think this is going to make us [cut and run](#), they are dead wrong."

On the Republican side, **John McCain** is also very fond of the phrase. On November 5 he told the Council on Foreign Relations, "Iraq is not Vietnam. There is no popular, anti-colonial insurgency.....I was heartened to here the President say there will be no [cut and run](#)." On April 7 he cautioned, "[Is it time to panic? To cut and run? Absolutely not.](#)" On May 18, he warned, "[If we fail, if we cut and run, the results can be disastrous.](#)"

Variations on the same construction have been used by many other Republicans, including [Virginia's John Warner](#), Minnesota's [Norm Coleman](#) ("[It's not time to cut and run](#)"), Missouri's [Chris Bond](#), and Alabama's Richard Shelby. (May 12: "We've got a lot at stake. We cannot [cut and run](#).")

Other senior US officials also love the phrase. Former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, who actually presided over the tail end of the Nixon-Ford Administration's "cut and run" strategy in Vietnam, told the US Senate with respect to Iraq on April 20 that "We going to be there for an extended period, unless we decide to [cut and run](#), which I trust will not be the case." Last November, Secretary of State Colin Powell commended Italy for its decision to "... not [cut and run](#)." On May 18 he echoed Blair: "We don't want to stay a day longer than we have to but we are not going to walk away. We are [not going to cut and run](#)."

Powell, a Vietnam vet like Kerry and McCain, uses this construction a lot. But at least with respect to Powell's warnings against "run cuts," the "Walter Wriston contrarian" rule may apply. In 2001, for example, with respect to US troops in the Balkans, Powell remarked that "The U.S. would not [cut and run](#)" from the region." At the time this was viewed as an implied criticism of neoconservatives who were seeking to limit America's "[imperial overstretch](#)" and "open ended military commitments," as Presidential candidate Bush actually [pledged to do](#) in 2000. Since then, the number of US troops in the Balkans has been reduced from 6900 to 4100, and the Administration is now reportedly looking for ways to eliminate it [completely](#).

Earlier, in September 1993, when Powell was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, he responded to the deaths of 18 US soldiers in Somalia with the comment, "Because things get difficult, you [don't cut and run](#)...You work the problem." Within two weeks of this statement, President

Clinton announced that the remaining 5000 US troops in Somalia would be withdrawn within six months.

In any case, the last time the “cut and run” phrase was so heavily used was a decade ago, around the time of this Somalia decision. In October 1993, William Safire, the New York Times columnist, former Nixon speechwriter, and self-styled lexicologist, devoted an entire “On Words” column to the origins of “[cut and run](#),” pointing out that it derives from an 18th century nautical reference to putting out to sea quickly by cutting a ship’s anchor cable.

Given the phrase’s recent revival, in early [May 2004](#) Safire dusted off this earlier column and recycled it.

He did not, however, bother to remind his readers that by far the most important occasion for its use was the unhappy experience of the Vietnam War, much of it presided over by his former boss.

In 1967-68, as opposition to the Vietnam War mounted, President Johnson repeatedly deplored the “nervous Nellies” who wanted to “cut and run.” After the Democrats passed on responsibility for the war, many leading Republicans, including future President Gerald Ford and Pennsylvania’s Senator Scott, disparaged those who wanted to “cut and run.” So did President Nixon, in his 1968 campaign against Hubert Humphrey as well as in his 1972 campaign against George McGovern, when he repeatedly assured conservatives that the US would somehow achieve “peace with honor” – that we would never “[cut and run](#).” At the same time, of course, Nixon winked and nodded to the increasingly anti-war public that he had a “secret plan” to end the war. But this was turned out to be just one of his many lies, told to garner a few votes from gullible peaceniks.

In fact [recent historical research has showed](#) that Nixon and Kissinger decided on a cynical “decent interval” approach to the US withdrawal from Vietnam as early as 1970, after having tried in vain to win the war with expanded bombing in 1969. The result was that the US spent another three years flailing around in Vietnam without a winning strategy, at the cost of 21,000 extra US lives and up to 1.5 million Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian lives. After that, it really did cut and run. This cynical, slow-motion approach to making “peace” probably helped Nixon win reelection. But it did nothing for the Vietnamese people, US troops, or, in the end, American honor. Far better for us to have – so be it -- “cut and run” way back in 1968.

Indeed, it turns out that by 1968, the Pentagon had indeed developed a plan for a rapid US withdrawal from Vietnam. But Hubert Humphrey refused to consider it, despite the fact that it might actually have won him the election. Evidently he was loyal to President Johnson. And he also didn't want to be perceived as having "[cut and run.](#)"

IRAQ - THE CASE FOR "CUT AND WALK"

It may not be surprising that President Bush has forgotten these painful lessons. But the fact that Vietnam veterans like Kerry and McCain have forgotten them, and, indeed, are repeating the same misleading phrase that Nixon once used to describe all alternatives to "staying the course," is disappointing.

Of course it is nonsense to suggest that the only alternative to an open-ended military occupation of Iraq is to "cut and run."

One such alternative might be described as "**cut and walk.**"

In broad strokes, this would include a reasonable (say, six-nine month) deadline for the withdrawal of (almost) all US and UK forces from Iraq, combined with a greatly-accelerated timetable (say, 90 days) for "interim"/ "first-round" elections at the local and regional levels.

The case for such a "cut and walk" policy is very strong, especially when viewed side by side with the high costs and highly uncertain benefits of the current strategy.

- It is now clear that the Coalition's purely-defensive security interests in the continued occupation of Iraq are **limited at best.**

While the Iraqi Army has obviously been destroyed, we have not found any WMDs, WMD programs, or terrorist training facilities in Iraq.

Meanwhile, the entire region has become an al-Qaeda recruiter's wet-dream.

Finally, if Iraq ever did become a clear and present danger to us, there'd be nothing to prevent our reoccupying the country – evidently that is something that we are good at.

- **Far from helping to insure peace and stability** in Iraq, the absence of a clear deadline for the presence of Coalition Forces helps to (1) attract foreign terrorists; (2) legitimize terrorism and spread the resistance; (3) increases the power base of those who happen to have private armies at their disposal; (4) undermine Iraqi support for moderate leaders; and (5) militarize ethnic, religious and tribal conflicts.

- In contrast, the existence of a firm near-term (say, six months) deadline, along with an accelerated (90 day) timetable for local and regional elections, would **almost instantly cause the Iraqi resistance to quiet down.**

That, in turn, would create several “virtuous cycles:” (1) It would permit the Iraqi people to turn their attention away from violence and toward the upcoming political elections. (2) It would discredit and undermine popular support for any leaders or foreign fighters who tried to perpetuate the resistance; (3) It would permit economic reconstruction, now largely on hold because of the security situation, to resume, permitting more and more ordinary Iraqis to feel that they are indeed better off than before Saddam’s demise.

- **Far from helping to promote positive relations** with the US, other Western powers, and the UN, the Coalition’s continued military presence, including its construction of 14 military bases and its dominance over economic policy, (1) feeds suspicions about neo-imperialism; (2) helps to promote anti-Western ideology; and (3) provides an opportunity for a variety of outside forces – Iran, Syria, and perhaps al-Qaeda – to gain influence.

- In contrast, the announcement of a firm withdrawal date would make it much clearer than it is now that the US/UK invasion of Iraq is “well-motivated,” in the sense that there are no grand designs on Iraqi oil, economic policy, or military bases.

- Far from encouraging democracy in the country, the continued occupation, combined a US- or even a UN-anointed, non-elected transitional regime, actually helps to undermine it, by (1) tainting the appointees with “guilt by association” with the occupying army, and (2) deferring popular elections, against the wishes of the great majority.

- On the other hand, for all their imperfections, moving directly to “snap elections” for local governments, regional assemblies, and,

soon thereafter, an interim (say, two-year) national congress, would (1) help to satisfy the Iraqi peoples' strong desire for representative government, and (2) give "unstable" parts of the country an incentive to settle down so that they would be entitled to participate in the elections.

With such a more representative body in place, it would of course be entitled to request foreign assistance for its police and military. In that event, forces under the auspices of the UN might well be asked back in. They would have much more legitimacy among ordinary Iraqis than the Coalition forces have now.

From the standpoint of the US and the UK, that would have the added attraction of sharing the astronomical costs of this expensive, misbegotten venture.

SUMMARY

Throughout its entire history, **the US has almost never "cut and run" from any foreign military intervention that it has undertaken** – even from Vietnam, where the last US combat troops did not leave Vietnam until March 1973.

In fact, a close look at more than fifty cases of US military intervention since the 1880s shows that the far greater risk has been for US troops to intervene repeatedly and stay too long, overstaying their welcome, especially in developing countries – for example, **China** (1894-95, 1898-1900, 1911-40, 1948-49), **Cuba** (1898-1902, 1906-09, 1912, 1917-1933, 1961), the **Dominican Republic** (1903-4, 1914, 1916-24, 1965-66), **Guatemala** (1920, 1966-67) **Haiti** (1891, 1914-1934, 1994-96, 2004-), **Honduras** (1903, 1907, 1911-12, 1919, 1924-25), **Mexico** (1913, 1914-18), **Nicaragua** (1894, 1896, 1898-99, 1907, 1910, 1912-1933), **Panama** (1895, 1901-1914, 1918-20, 1925, 1958, 1964, 1989-90, plus bases), **the Philippines** (1898-1910, plus continuing bases), **Russia** (1918-22), **Vietnam** (1959-73), and **Korea** (1894-96, 1904-5, 1950-53, plus continuing bases.)

Despite this, American policymakers appear to have long been fixated on the risk that the US might be viewed as "cutting and running" from such engagements – as, indeed, they are fixated today, with respect to Iraq. Just like their earlier fixation with Saddam's WMDs and his purported links to al-Qaeda, this may turn out to be a very costly obsession.



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