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## The Real Iraq We Knew

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By 12 former Army captains

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Today marks five years since the [authorization](#) of military force in Iraq, setting Operation Iraqi Freedom in motion. Five years on, the Iraq war is as undermanned and under-resourced as it was from the start. And, five years on, Iraq is in shambles.

As Army captains who served in Baghdad and beyond, we've seen the corruption and the sectarian division. We understand what it's like to be stretched too thin. And we know when it's time to get out.

What does Iraq look like on the ground? It's certainly far from being a modern, self-sustaining country. Many roads, bridges, schools and hospitals are in deplorable condition. Fewer people have access to drinking water or sewage systems than before the war. And Baghdad is averaging less than eight hours of electricity a day.

Iraq's institutional infrastructure, too, is sorely wanting. Even if the Iraqis wanted to work together and accept the national identity foisted upon them in 1920s, the ministries do not have enough trained administrators or technicians to coordinate themselves. At the local level, most communities are still controlled by the same autocratic sheiks that ruled under Saddam. There is no reliable postal system. No effective banking system. No registration system to monitor the population and its needs.

The inability to govern is exacerbated at all levels by widespread corruption. [Transparency International](#) ranks Iraq as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. And, indeed, many of us witnessed the exploitation of U.S. tax dollars by Iraqi officials and military officers. Sabotage and graft have had a particularly deleterious impact on Iraq's oil industry, which still fails to produce the revenue that Pentagon war planners hoped would pay for Iraq's reconstruction. Yet holding people accountable has proved difficult. The first commissioner of a panel charged with preventing and investigating corruption resigned last month, citing pressure from the government and threats on his life.

Against this backdrop, the U.S. military has been trying in vain to hold the country together. Even with "the surge," we simply do not have enough soldiers and marines to meet the professed goals of clearing areas from insurgent control, holding them securely and building sustainable institutions. Though temporary reinforcing operations in places like Fallujah, An Najaf, Tal Afar, and now Baghdad may brief well on PowerPoint presentations, in practice they just push insurgents to another spot on the map and often strengthen the insurgents' cause by harassing locals to a point of swayed allegiances. Millions of Iraqis correctly recognize these actions for what they are and vote with their feet -- moving within Iraq or leaving the country entirely. Still, our colonels and generals keep holding on to flawed concepts.

U.S. forces, responsible for too many objectives and too much "battle space," are vulnerable targets. The sad inevitability of a protracted draw-down is further escalation of attacks -- on U.S. troops, civilian leaders and advisory teams. They would also no doubt get caught in the crossfire of the imminent Iraqi civil war.

Iraqi security forces would not be able to salvage the situation. Even if all the Iraqi military and police were properly trained, equipped and truly committed, their 346,000 personnel would be too few. As it is, Iraqi soldiers quit at will. The police are effectively controlled by militias. And, again, corruption is debilitating. U.S. tax dollars enrich self-serving generals and support the very elements that will battle each other after we're gone.

This is Operation Iraqi Freedom and the reality we experienced. This is what we tried to communicate

up the chain of command. This is either what did not get passed on to our civilian leadership or what our civilian leaders chose to ignore. While our generals pursue a strategy dependent on peace breaking out, the Iraqis prepare for their war -- and our servicemen and women, and their families, continue to suffer.

There is one way we might be able to succeed in Iraq. To continue an operation of this intensity and duration, we would have to abandon our volunteer military for compulsory service. Short of that, our best option is to leave Iraq immediately. A scaled withdrawal will not prevent a civil war, and it will spend more blood and treasure on a losing proposition.

America, it has been five years. It's time to make a choice.

*This column was written by 12 former Army captains: Jason Blindauer served in Babil and Baghdad in 2003 and 2005. Elizabeth Bostwick served in Salah Ad Din and An Najaf in 2004. Jeffrey Bouldin served in Al Anbar, Baghdad and Ninevah in 2006. Jason Bugajski served in Diyala in 2004. Anton Kemps served in Babil and Baghdad in 2003 and 2005. Kristy (Luken) McCormick served in Ninevah in 2003. Luis Carlos Montalván served in Anbar, Baghdad and Nineveh in 2003 and 2005. William Murphy served in Babil and Baghdad in 2003 and 2005. Josh Rizzo served in Baghdad in 2006. William "Jamie" Ruehl served in Nineveh in 2004. Gregg Tharp served in Babil and Baghdad in 2003 and 2005. Gary Williams served in Baghdad in 2003.*

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