

Iraq and the 2012 U.S. Presidential Elections

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LUKE FALKENBURG, NOV 9 2012

Even though Iraq appears to be a mute issue in the upcoming presidential election, continued violence emanating from Iraq may culminate in a crisis erupting. Should a foreign policy crisis erupt as a result of instability in Iraq, it would re-emerge to the forefront of the American conscious and make it a pivotal factor that may determine the outcome of the 2012 presidential election, reflecting the old adage that foreign policy failures lose elections but success hardly contributes to their victory. Therefore, if a strong democratic and pro-American Iraq emerges, it will not hurt Obama politically but will unlikely help him domestically either. Conversely, should Iraq erupt into sectarian violence or take an anti-American stance, particularly should engagement with Iran become inevitable, it will have negative consequences for Obama during the election.

Accordingly, this paper will test the adage as it may relate to the upcoming presidential elections should Iraq explode or implode. First, examination of the Carter administration will examine how foreign policy crisis can hamper re-election by negatively affecting the incumbent president's domestic support. Second, a look at the Reagan administration's ability to avert electoral disaster and maintain public support will be analyzed. Third, the form and likelihood of instability in Iraq emerging will be explored. Fourth, based on previous historical lessons, the impact of Iraqi instability on the 2012 elections will be considered, to include a rise in oil prices, the influence of interest groups, and the influence of the media. Finally, GOP ("Grand Old Party/Republican Party) methods to capitalize on a crisis in Iraq will be examined, and how the Democratic Party and President Obama could retain the president's domestic support regardless of a crisis in Iraq.

First, former President Jimmy Carter confirms foreign policy successes do not overshadow foreign crises for incumbent presidents. For example, in 1978, Carter advocated for returning the Panama Canal to Panama. However, the GOP through the use of lobby groups such as the "Committee to save the Panama Canal" and the "Emergency Coalition to Save the Panama Canal" framed the event as a national security issue. They declared by leaving Panama, the Soviets would expand their influence in Latin American.[i] Although Carter emerged victoriously from the debate, the Democratic Party suffered in the 1978 elections when of the 20 senators who had voted in favor of the Panama treaty, six failed to run for re-election and seven lost.[ii] Consequently, what is perceived to be a political victory can quickly turn into a defeat, as Obama's withdrawal from Iraq may turn out to be should a crisis emerge in Iraq.

Furthermore, despite Carter's success with the Camp David Accords, the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan quickly overshadowed the Egyptian-Israeli peace. Additionally, Camp David was dwarfed by the fall of the Shah in Iran in 1979, and ensuing Iranian hostage crisis where 52 diplomats were held captive.[iii] His subsequent rescue attempt, *Operation Eagle Claw*, failed miserably and resulted in a tremendous domestic backlash for the administration.[iv] Whether correctly or incorrectly, Carter was blamed for making U.S. foreign policy weak, which permitted global events to deteriorate and made U.S. security feeble. These accusations created a wedge in his own party when Senator Ted Kennedy accused Carter of shaping foreign policy for his own political purposes at the expense of national security.[v] Julian Zelizer sums up the events that led to Carter's presidential defeat, "Democrats ran away from him, Republicans charged right into him. The conservative movement and its representatives had been able to respond effectively when a series of crises emerged within a short time span." [vi] Christopher Decker and Mark Wohar's examination of 7 presidential elections prior to 2004, echo the reasoning behind Carter's defeat in their studies that determine when the international environment becomes more unstable 3 years prior to election the

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incumbent president's likelihood of re-election is greatly reduced.[vii] Obama currently faces the potential for a series of crises to emerge, especially in the Arab world, within a short time span, culminating with Iraq. As Carter demonstrates, failure in Iraq could quickly veil earlier success such as the operation against Osama bin Laden at Abbottabad and could weaken his own internal support within the Democratic Party.

Yet presidents are able to emerge victorious from a seemingly unredeemable foreign crisis, especially if the crisis is perceived as not being vital to U.S. national interest. President Reagan clearly exhibited this point. For example, Reagan's strategic retreat from Lebanon did not cause him to lose his re-election, because Lebanon and its 15-year civil war were not deemed vital to American interests, to the extent that the event could sway public opinion come election time. Unfortunately for Obama, Iraq is not Lebanon, and it will prove more difficult to dismiss in the eyes of the American public should disaster strike.

Additionally, President Reagan emerged victorious from foreign policy crisis surrounding the Iran-Contra scandal, and his successor, George H. W. Bush, emerged victorious in his 1988 election.[viii] Within a month of Iran-Contra being exposed, Reagan's popularity according to a Gallup poll at the time plummeted from 67% to 46%.[ix] Despite this, Reagan effectively deflected election-altering criticism for several reasons. For example, many Democrats wished to avoid another "Watergate" like scandal was too costly for the nation and success with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty between Gorbachev and Reagan in 1987 helped divert the public's attention.[x] However, a divided Iraq poses challenges to U.S. strategic security and regional interests that will prove difficult to deflect from public debate. Also, a hostile Iraq, should negotiations with Iran prove futile, are of vital interest to the interests of the United States and will significantly affect the upcoming presidential election in Romney's favor, unless President Obama effectively deflects criticism from his opponents, which could possibly come by way of reaching a negotiated settlement with Iran, mimicking the Gorbachev/Reagan treaty.

Next, there are several ways instability in Iraq could emerge. For example, Kenneth Pollack in his article identifies three Iraqi scenarios that may significantly alter the outcome of the upcoming U.S. presidential election: a relapse into civil war; emergence as an aggressive state; emergence as a staunch U.S. ally.[xi] However, if a democratic Iraq emerges it will reflect the adage that foreign policy does not help incumbent presidents get re-elected as other domestic issues will take precedence. As aforementioned, success at the Camp David Accords did not protect President Carter from being defeated after the Iranian crisis. Furthermore, even though President Bush enjoyed a 92% approval rating after the first Gulf War, Bill Clinton won on the platform of fixing the economy. Additionally, John McCain's clear foreign policy advantage did not stop Obama's victory after the 2008 recession.[xii]

Although a relapse into sectarian conflict poses the most direct threat to President Obama's re-election campaign, Pollack's second and third scenarios will prove to be critical should the U.S. decide to take more forceful action on Iran. Already, allegations that Nouri al-Maliki's government has permitted Iran to use Iraqi territory to supply Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria question Iraqi-U.S. relations.[xiii] Should a government hostile to American interests emerge, Obama's policy towards Iraq and withdrawal of U.S. ground forces will be effectively viewed by the GOP, and arguably a significant portion of U.S. citizens, as a short-sighted political move, which weakened U.S. regional influence, increased Iranian ascendancy, and lessened security gains when it was needed. However, should Iraq emerge as a staunch U.S. ally, Obama will gain a slight, if not significant, advantage in the election, because he will have allowed the U.S. flexibility of movement in dealing with Iran without being bogged down in Iraq. The last two scenarios hinge on events escalating with Iran. Should Iran become quiet, and Iraq take an anti-U.S. stance the U.S. can simply walk away without affecting U.S. domestic politics. However, a relapse into sectarian violence in Iraq will affect the U.S. Presidential elections, regardless of Iran.

Currently, the most likely scenario is a relapse into civil war, which could easily occur in the wake of a military coup, official misconduct, assassinations, or simple sectarian violence, all of which are immediate threats.[xiv] Sectarian violence could be Arab-Kurd, Sunni-Shi'ite, or even intra-Shi'ite should leaders such as Muqtada al-Sadr decide to no longer comply with the Maliki government. Furthermore, Maliki is already at odds with former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and *Iraqiya* after chasing his Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi into hiding and arresting political opponents. Moreover, Iraq was just recently rocked by 40 car bomb attacks.[xv] Additionally, 20 police officers in Haditha were recently assassinated.[xvi] These events clearly indicate that the future of Iraq is far from certain. Therefore, the

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likelihood of Iraq coming to the forefront of the upcoming election is probable, if not imminent. Civil war, instability, or any Iraqi stance opposed to U.S. interests would increase risks and uncertainty in an already volatile region, likely contributing to the already confrontational Sunni-Shi'ite confrontation. This future of uncertainty and increased risk in the region would dramatically touch upon U.S. domestic issues and thus the U.S. presidential elections by increasing oil prices in the U.S., inflaming public opinion and interest groups, receiving criticism from the media, be capitalized upon by the GOP, and wedge the democratic party.

The effect of a rise in petroleum costs might prove fatal for President Obama and advantageous for Mitt Romney. Whether correctly or incorrectly, voters would blame Obama for the spike in costs. This was already demonstrated in the first Gulf War, when a hostile Iraq threatened the Gulf Cooperation Council, President Bush responded with military force and oil prices skyrocketed. These oil prices directly contributed to President Bush's defeat by Clinton in the 1992 elections, despite the former's foreign policy achievements.[xvii] Additionally, oil prices spiked before the 1976 and 1980 presidential elections. This was caused because of OPEC's oil embargo and the start of the Iraq-Iran war in 1980. In both instances the incumbent presidents, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, failed to be re-elected.[xviii] As recently as the 2008 election, an Associated Press-Yahoo News poll determined 59% of the population saw gas prices as critical for their voting, followed by 48% concerned with the Iraq war.[xix] These two issues were not mutually exclusive in 2008 and they are not exclusive in 2012. Since the Mideast possesses 65.3% of the world's proven oil reserves, and U.S. dependence on petroleum imports are expected to reach 62% in the next 8 years, increased costs at the gas pump would enrage voters before an election.[xx] Decker and Wohar's research concluded that increases in petroleum costs have minor impacts on voter support for incumbent presidents unless they spike substantially, especially among voters in energy consuming states.[xxi] However, it can be assumed that should Iraq deteriorate, the resulting regional instability would indeed cause petroleum to spike, which would have catastrophic consequences for President Obama.

Next, the demographics of voters in the U.S. must be reviewed. Groups identifying themselves as part of the American Arab community in the U.S. are relatively small. Most of these American Arabs are from Lebanon. Only 24% are Muslim, and almost 63% come from various Christian denominations.[xxii] Therefore, Arab Americans would not likely be a major factor in election results. However, powerful interest groups such as pro-Israel American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) have a strong interest in the future of Iraq, especially in how it may impact any future engagement with Iran. Also, the fact the U.S. military involvement in Iraq lasted so long and cost so much, financially and in lives, will clearly be represented by powerful veteran's organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion, which represent approximately 21.9 million veterans in the U.S. (2009).[xxiii] The influence of these interest groups on the election cannot be underestimated and would expectedly turn against Obama if Iraq fails. One only needs to remember the aforementioned influence of strong lobbying and special interest campaigns against Carter post-Panama to recognize the significance of interest groups on domestic politics and elections. Furthermore, the previously mentioned groups are small, well organized, have focused interests, possess great financial power, and maintain strong ideologies. Also, politicians often cater to them since they depend on their support for re-elections.[xxiv] If Iraq falters, these groups, through their political influence, may be a catalyst to create a wedge in Democratic support for Obama over his retrenchment from Iraq. Yet it must be remembered Obama would have several powerful interest groups in support of him such as anti-Iraq War groups and organizations such as J Street (the counter AIPAC Jewish Lobby). The power of these groups were clearly demonstrated by the anti-Vietnam movements of 1970 that shut down college campuses nationwide and led to nearly half a million individuals marching on Washington DC in protest of U.S. foreign policy.[xxv]

Thirdly, these interest groups, in collaboration with/or without the media, are capable of impacting public opinion as a deteriorating or hostile Iraq emerges. Media content, often determined by viewer appeal instead of quality content, has the potential to sway the voting habits of fickle public. Although the media often oversimplifies or distorts events, they can easily enforce previously held stereotypes and sway an impulsive public uneducated on foreign policy.[xxvi] Therefore, the question becomes whether the media would act as a "cheerleader" or a "critic" to Obama's Iraq policy.[xxvii] Although Iraq has left many American's whimsical attention span, Iraq is and was a familiar topic in the news and could quickly produce a strong public reaction. Moreover, the conflict that cost over \$3 trillion to taxpayers, left 32,000 U.S. soldiers wounded, and over 4,000 dead could easily become a major campaign issue, should Obama be perceived by the public to have exited Iraq prematurely at the cost of U.S. security and strategic

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interests.[xxviii]

Although media coverage of Iraq could easily weaken President Obama's domestic position, it need not become a decisive factor in the presidential elections. For example, as previously mentioned, the Iran-Contra coverage clearly had negative effects for the GOP and President Regan; however, President Bush still managed to win the 1988 election.[xxix] Conversely, consistent coverage of a crisis can have devastating effects. For example, *Nightline's* consistent weeknight coverage of the Iran hostage crisis signaled to the American public that Carter's leadership was incapable of resolving the deteriorating situation.[xxx] Furthermore, the fall of Iraq could be equated with the fall of Saigon in 1975. Images of the American embassy in Baghdad being evacuated could easily be viewed as a national security failure and an inspiration to America's enemies. An enraged public may demand an alternate foreign policy approach, which could be reflected in the presidential elections.[xxxi] However, the extent of the media's influence over the public is contested. For example, American faith in the media, according to a Pew Research Poll, has been deteriorating. In 2005, 60% of voters believed the media was politically biased compared to 45% in 1985.[xxxii] Regardless, although deteriorating, media remains a strong domestic force; even if anger produced via media coverage is often short-lived and insignificant in the long-term.[xxxiii] Nevertheless, other factors may sustain any initial voter outrage, and depending on how close to election an Iraqi flare-up occurs short-term anger may be all that is need to produce a Romney victory.

Fourthly, how effectively the GOP capitalizes on a crisis/failure in Iraq may prove to be detrimental to Obama's campaign. Crisis in Iraq may be used to question the president's foreign policy leadership after failing to provide continued U.S. military ICC exemption in Iraq, necessary for sustaining regional and national security.[xxxiv] Romney may claim withdrawal was a political maneuver to fulfill a campaign pledge, which instead jeopardized national security. Romney already made Iraq an issue of national security when in a 2008 Republican debate he said leaving Iraq was "unthinkable. And that's why I will not walk away from Iraq until we have been successful and finish that job." [xxxv] If tensions escalate with Iran, and Iraq fails to be a staunch U.S. ally or an Iranian stooge, this will be especially evident. Romney will be able to convincingly state to the American public that achievements and strategic initiative resulting from the Bush/Petraeus surge in Iraq, such as the emergence of the Awakening Councils, were effectively destroyed as a result of U.S. withdrawal. Additionally, Romney will claim an Iraq crisis has had domestic consequences such as rising oil prices, has limited U.S. options for dealing with Iran, and has limited the ability to maintain regional and Iraqi stability in U.S. interests, a statement AIPAC would surely echo. Historically, the American public has clearly responded to issues of national security. This will be especially evident if it concerns Iraq, a country familiar to the public, and is linked with the Global War on Terrorism and the confrontation with Iran. Although, pre-invasion links with terrorist groups were fabricated, the existence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq now establishes that link. This could create a "rally around the flag" pattern of public opinion prior to the election in favor of Romney, if he is viewed as being more patriotic and concerned with national security than Obama.[xxxvi] Furthermore, the GOP would aim to make a crisis in Iraq a national security failure to wedge the Democratic Party against itself, much like the previously mentioned schism between Senator Kennedy and President Carter over Iran.

On the other hand, a critical factor in Obama's favor is the fact that Romney may have to take a strong foreign policy stance before a crisis from Iraq emanates. A firm policy stance would make Romney vulnerable to domestic backlash from foreign crisis and may limit his ability to attack Obama during the election. According to former Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge, presidents usually dictate national security and foreign policy and their opponents just react to what he does; however, with increasing international incidents it is becoming critical for them to outline a plan of their own.[xxxvii] The GOP contender cannot currently claim Obama is sheepish in his foreign policy after U.S. involvement in Libya and the successful operation targeting Osama bin Laden. Furthermore, Obama had previously raised troop levels in Afghanistan by 30,000 and increased drone strikes, despite resistance from within his own party. By May of 2011, of the 243 drone strikes conducted, 198 had been under Obama's watch.[xxxviii] Already, President Obama has enlisted the help of former Secretary of State Madeline Albright and retired General Wesley Clark to make national security a campaign issue that works in his favor. Traditionally, national security has been a Republican strongpoint, but now that Obama is pressing the issue to show he is "hawkish" when necessary, he is effectively preventing Romney from taking the traditional wishy-washy stance that most presidential opponents enjoy when dealing with foreign affairs during presidential elections.[xxxix] Therefore, as aforementioned, a flare up in Iraq could offer the GOP a domestic opportunity to claim Obama did not handle the

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withdrawal from Iraq properly. In any event, this potential backlash may be mitigated if the GOP contender is forced to take a strong stance on foreign policy and Iraq before the assumed crisis occurs.

Likewise, if the situation in Iraq deteriorates rapidly, it may work in favor of Obama's election campaign. Periods of instability have worked favorably for presidents during WWII and the Korean War. This is because voters may determine a transition in leadership is too costly in time of crisis.[xi] Therefore, although international crises can increase a president's vulnerability during elections, crisis can also strengthen it. In the end, Obama must take some lessons from his predecessor. President George W. Bush's credentials as a foreign policy leader were questioned in his initial 2000 election, but were not questioned after his handling of 9/11, until U.S. involvement with Iraq.[xii] According to a Gallup poll, Bush enjoyed a 90% approval rating post-9/11, but by September of 2008 it had lowered to 27%.[xiii] Iraq specifically, support was at 81% in 2003 and had decreased to 40% by 2006.[xiv] Therefore, Obama must realize domestic support is fickle and can quickly change due to foreign crisis. Although Bush's support declined due to an overextension of American hard power in foreign policy dealing with Iraq, amongst other issues, Obama's soft approach toward Iraq could create a similar domestic backlash prior to elections if a crisis emerges in Iraq.

In the end, the likelihood that Iraq will re-emerge at the forefront of the American conscious prior to the 2012 presidential elections is probable. History reflects, notably through presidencies such as President Carter, the adage that foreign policy will lose elections but rarely wins them. However, as the Reagan administration displays that this is not always the case, and presidents are quite capable of moving past crises to successfully defend their incumbencies. President Obama, in order to retain his presidency, will have to not only face criticism from the GOP, interest groups, the media, and the public should Iraq falter but also put Romney on the defensive and convincingly persuade the American public that he is the best leader to effectively navigate through a crisis. Regardless, Iraqi stability or foreign policy credentials in general will not ensure victory when domestic issues take precedence, a lesson Obama should recall from his 2008 victory over McCain.

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[iv] Johns, Andrew. "Foreign Policy and the 2012 Presidential Election." June 6, 2011. *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations*. <http://www.shafr.org/2011/06/06/3235/>.

[v] Zelizer, p.295.

[vi] Ibid, p.298.

[vii] Decker, Christopher S. & Mark E. Wohar. "Do Increases in petroleum product prices put the incumbent party at risk in US presidential elections?" *Applied Economics*, Vol. 39, No.6 (2007). p.727-737 <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00036840600735408>, p.735.

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[ix] Zelizer, p.344.

[x] Ibid, p.346 & 351.

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[xii] Johns.

[xiii] Unknown. "Iraqi PM denies US reports on Iran relief aid for Syria." *Press TV*. March 17, 2012. <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/232087.html>.

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[xviii] Ibid, p.728.

[xix] Bostdorff, Denise M. "Judgment, Experience, and Leadership: Candidate Debates on the Iraq War in the 2008 Presidential Primaries." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, Vol.12, No.2 (2009), Project Muse, p.226.

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[xxi] Decker, p.736.

[xxii] Sturkey, p.8-9.

[xxiii] U.S. Census Bureau. http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/cb10-ff21.html.

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[xxvi] Graber, p. 367.

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[xxxii] Jentleson, p.60.

[xxxiii] Graber, p.164.

[xxxiv] Pollack, p.6.

[xxxv] Bostdorff, p.255.

[xxxvi] Jentleson, p.63.

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[xl] Decker, p.733.

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[xli] Jentleson, p.42.

[xlii] Rajaei, p.2.

[xliii] Jentleson, p.472.

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