

The Costs of Quagmire

By Erik Leaver | September 14, 2005

As the costs begin to escalate in the Gulf States with Congress authorizing \$60 billion for rescue and cleanup operations and as fingers point in the Capital, the costs of another quagmire mount—that of the Iraq War. The death and destruction strewn by hurricane Katrina may equal or even exceed the death toll of U.S. soldiers in the Iraq War. But while 6,000 miles separates the two, the links between war overseas and the fate of those in Katrina's wake are closely interwoven.

Just as policymakers evaluate our nation's response to Hurricane Katrina so too should they reevaluate our policies in the Persian Gulf.

Cindy Sheehan's vigil outside President Bush's ranch and now the Gold Star Families for Peace bus tour bring the human cost of the war into all our living rooms. Most Americans are somewhat aware of the body count for the United States, now amounting to 1,895 dead and 14,362 wounded as of September 8, 2005. Yet most are not aware that the number of Iraqi civilians killed is more than 10 times the number of Americans who have lost their lives.

Most don't know how many children could have obtained health insurance or how many elementary school teachers could have been hired with the \$204.4 billion of U.S. tax dollars spent on the war so far. Most don't know the enormous financial burden shouldered by the majority of U.S. military families. Most are barely aware of the legion of other costs—economic, human, environmental, legal, social, and more—born by millions of people in Iraq, in the United States, and around the world.

The costs keep mounting. An examination of three of them illustrate why we can no longer "stay the course":

An Expensive Quagmire: Monthly operations costs in Iraq are estimated at \$5.6 billion in 2005. By comparison, the average cost of U.S. operations in Vietnam over that war's peak eight years was \$5.1 billion per month, adjusting for inflation. The Iraq War coupled with Afghanistan could cost more than \$700 billion and at its current rate will cause the national deficit to double within 10 years.

The Resistance Continues to Rise: Iraq's resistance forces remain at 16,000-40,000 even with the U.S. coalition killing or capturing 1,600 resistance forces per month. Suicide attack rates rose to 10 per month in 2005, doubling the rate before the January elections.

The U.S. Military is Beginning to Crumble: Members of the Army National Guard have been hit particularly hard in recent months, with an average of 13.3 deaths per month since the elections, the highest of any period since the 2003 invasion. Over 1 million soldiers have served in Iraq or Afghanistan and nearly 1/3 of active-duty troops have served two or more tours.

These costs illustrate why Iraq policy can no longer be a partisan issue. Today both Democrats and Republicans are recognizing the costs and are beginning to look for common ground alternatives beyond Bush's call to "stay the course." Discussions are underway in the halls of Congress, in homes, schools, and workplaces across the United States about stopping this war—how to bring home the troops, and end the quagmire.

Six months ago in official circles the words "withdraw," "quagmire," and "exit strategy" were avoided altogether, or spoken only in whispers. Today 60 percent of Americans believe the President's handling of the war is wrong. Sixty percent of Americans want to bring the troops home and 33 percent want them all brought home immediately. Better yet, Iraqis want that too; close to half of Iraq's elected parliamentarians have called for the "departure" of foreign troops.



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But simply calling to bring the troops home now isn't enough. The United States owes more than that to the people of Iraq. New exit strategies are appearing rapidly from think tanks, academics, citizens, and members of Congress. This is an important and healthy development. Particularly heartening is a briefing called by Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey for September 15, to bring together experts offering a variety of exit plans. The newfound debate over exit strategies is a useful one, whether in Congress, in the classroom, around the dinner table, or anywhere else.

But whatever the plan, it is time to open the debate and to work toward the common ground that will be required to bring the troops home and internationalize the peace. We need to do this, for the sake of Iraqis but also to help make our own country safe and secure.

Erik Leaver is a research fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies and the policy outreach director for the Foreign Policy In Focus Project. He is the co-author of a new report, "The Iraq Quagmire: The Mounting Costs of War and the Case for Bringing Home the Troops," available online at: <http://www.ips-dc.org/iraq/quagmire/>.

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Writer: Erik Leaver, IPS
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