



Reality Check

Okay, I was wrong. I admit it. The death toll has risen too far, and the injury count has spiraled totally out of control. Despite anything I may have said before, I now see that there can be no justification for attempting to stay the course. It's time to cut our losses before more of our people are killed needlessly. The price is simply too high and the return has not been large enough. America absolutely *must* stop driving cars, and we must do it *now*!

Yes, you heard me correctly. I said that America must stop driving cars. It's the only way to end this senseless waste of human life.

According to figures from the National Center for Statistics and Analysis, an average of 37,469 Americans are killed every year in traffic accidents. We've simply got to get our cars, trucks, and motorcycles off the road. It's the only way to end the bloodshed.

Although the current media climate has trained us to associate major loss of life with the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, in fact, the casualty counts in Iraq aren't even a pinprick compared to the number of fatalities that occur every day as Americans go about the routine dealings of employment and leisure. As of this writing, 2,306 American military personnel have been killed in Iraq, in roughly 36 months of fighting. We're losing about 768 Americans a year to the Iraqi insurgency. That sounds like a high number. That *is* a high number. I don't want to lose 768 Americans to *any* cause. But we're losing an average of 744 people a year to bicycle accidents. Yes, *bicycle accidents*. Nearly as many American's died riding bicycles last year as were killed in Iraq. The details are publicly available via the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) on the Department of Transportation and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration websites.

Okay, we all know that riding a bicycle is dangerous, so that's not really a fair comparison. Let's try something simple, like walking. Surely walking is safer, right? Wrong. An average of 5,127 American pedestrians are killed by cars

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every year. *The simple act of crossing the street kills six and a half times more Americans than combat in Iraq.*

Care to guess how many American's die from falling down the stairs in an average year? You can find the figures on the National Safety Council's website, but I'll give you a hint; it's more than twice as high as the number of U.S. casualties in Iraq. While you're visiting the NSC's database, take a peek at the numbers for people who die by falling out of bed, tripping over furniture, or who trip and die on level and unobstructed floors. They all kill more Americans a year than we lose in the Middle East.

I'm not suggesting that driving a car is as dangerous as going into combat. The situations are *not* equal; combat is *tremendously* more dangerous. To imply otherwise would be careless at the very least, and dishonest at worst. It would also constitute an insult to our brave men and women in uniform, which I would never intentionally do.

I'm also not suggesting that the situations I've mentioned here are statistically equivalent. The population samples I've been tossing around are *not* comparably sized. There are only about 132,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, and there are over 196,000,000 drivers in the United States. The cases are peas and apples, or maybe even peas and watermelons. They don't balance, and I'm not pretending that they do.

But we're witnessing an enormous erosion of public support for the U.S. mission in Iraq, and I'm trying to figure out what's causing it. Have the American people suddenly decided that the citizens of Iraq don't deserve our help? I don't think so. Are we convinced that our presence there is no longer necessary, or that the insurgents will spontaneously abandon the bombs and beheadings when the last American troops have pulled out? I can't imagine that anyone is naive enough to buy that for a second. Have we determined that democracy in other countries is an irrelevant concept? Is it acceptable for members of the political minority to use murder and torture to impose their will on the political majority, as long as it occurs somewhere else? I can't see that either.

There has to be something else at work here, some other factor that's influencing this evolution of public opinion. I can only think of two other issues that could be driving this attitudinal shift: Either the mission in Iraq is too difficult or the casualty count is just too high.

I hope with every fiber of my being that difficulty is not the issue. If America has collectively decided to only tackle the easy challenges, then we're already lost as a nation, no matter what happens in the Middle East. If our national will has become so weak that adversity can overpower our desire for justice and liberty, America is already defeated. I don't want to believe that. I cannot make myself believe that. So I have to assume that the second factor is at work. The body count has climbed too high, and our society feels the need to bring the fighting to a close and end the loss of life.

I strongly suspect that this last idea is behind the American people's growing desire to pull out of Iraq. The cost is just gotten too high. Too many of our military personnel are being killed.



I want to agree with this idea; I really do. The idealist in me wants to shout from the rooftops that even *one* fallen Soldier is too many. Even *one* drop of spilled blood is too much. But the realist in me knows that such a declaration amounts to saying that I will pay no price for freedom. I will risk nothing for liberty. I will accept equality and justice if they come to me without cost, but I am unwilling to sacrifice anything to obtain or defend them.

My father taught me that you get what you pay for. If we are willing to pay nothing, then that's what we will receive: Nothing.

During World War II, an average of 6,626 American service members lost their lives every month. That's not total losses for the war, or losses per year. That's the average number of U.S. combat deaths every *month*. The casualty rate for any month you want to choose was more than three times higher than our total losses in 36 months of fighting in Iraq.

In the Korean War, U.S. troop fatalities averaged about 910 a month. That's a little over 140 more casualties per *month* than we lose every *year* in Iraq.

By Vietnam, the casualty count was down to roughly 526 losses per month. (That's a little more than 8 times as many as we're losing now.)

The casualty count during Desert Storm was phenomenally low. Major combat lasted about a month, and we lost 148 service members. That was by far the lowest combat fatality rate in recorded history.

In view of the scale of combat operations and the strength of the enemy forces arrayed against us, many military experts considered that number to be freakishly low. Common opinion held that the U.S. military had created expectations that it couldn't possibly live up to. We'd never get that lucky again. Never again would we manage to pull off a major combat operation with losses as low as 148 deaths per month.

But we have done it, and we continue to do it every day. Because that bizarrely low figure was more than two and a half times as high as our current losses in Iraq (about 64 per month).

Think about that for a second: U.S. losses during the first Gulf War were so low that they were generally regarded as a statistical miracle that we'd never be able to repeat. And yet, that miraculously low casualty count was nearly two and a half times as high as what we're experiencing now.

If you watch an hour of cable news today, or read a newspaper, you'll probably encounter several references to the unprecedented number of U.S. military personnel dying in Iraq. Judging from the shift in public opinion, the American people are swallowing this idea hook, line, and sinker. Well, the idea is fifty-percent accurate. Our losses in Iraq *are* without precedent. They're so phenomenally low that there is no remotely parallel example in history. But you won't see *that* on the front page of any newspapers.

I know this column is going to bring me at least a few hundred emails from people who think I'm trying to conceal human pain and tragedy behind a wall of numbers. They'll call me a heartless warmonger, and ask me how I can be oblivious to the death and suffering in Iraq.



I'm not oblivious. I have friends over there, and family, and men and women whom I've trained with and served with. I don't want *any* of them to die, and I don't want any of them to suffer so much as a single injury, a single scar, or a single nightmare. I pray continuously for their safety, and for the safety of the thousands whose names I'll never know. I pray for the Iraqi people, who deserve the opportunity to live in peace and freedom.

I worry that public opinion will force us to abandon Iraq. America is a representative democracy. The will of the people *should* be heard, and popular opinion *should* influence the actions of our government. But I think the growing opposition to our presence in Iraq is based on an utterly inaccurate appraisal of our losses there. We're gearing up to make an enormously important national decision based on false information. If we're not very careful, the repercussions of that decision will spread far beyond the borders of Iraq. I have this horrible feeling that two years from now, or five, we're going to look back at this moment in history and wonder how we let the bad guys win.

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