EXIT OR NO EXIT? MORALITY AND WITHDRAWAL FROM IRAQ

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**Moderator**
TRUDY RUBIN
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**Panelists**
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Author of *Just and Unjust Wars* and *Arguing About War*

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MARGARET STEINFELS: The clock back there says 5:59, some people have watches that say 6:05. I am going to arbitrarily declare it 6 o’clock and begin. There seems to be room for the late-comers, and I’m sure you will all move over to let them in.

I am Margaret Steinfels, Co-Director of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture. I want to welcome everyone to this headline forum, “Exit or No Exit? Morality and Withdrawal from Iraq.” Welcome to the audience here to Fordham’s Lincoln Center campus, and a warm welcome to our friends and colleagues, some watching by live video, at the Kroc Institute at the University of Notre Dame.

Is that what it’s called, Jerry, live video?
MARGARET STEINFELS: Thank you.

The Kroc Institute is co-sponsoring this forum. I also want to welcome any Notre Dame alums who are in the audience here.

As many of you know, and many of you were there, in March 2005 the Center on Religion and Culture and the Kroc Institute jointly organized a conference here at Fordham called “The Ethics of Exit.” Two-and-a-half years later, it is sobering that we gather once again to survey the same moral quandaries. We are particularly grateful that three of the participants at that conference — Jean Elshtain, Sohail Hashmi, and Jerry Powers — have joined us again tonight. We welcome Michael Walzer, who just couldn’t make it in 2005.

We are grateful to the Fordham students who are ushering tonight. You see them in the aisles. Throughout the discussion they will be collecting any written questions you may have. That’s what the cards and the pencils are there for. If you just hold up the card, they will come and pick it up. Should you need an extra one, they have those as well.

Our moderator tonight is Trudy Rubin. She will introduce the speakers. Each will speak for eight minutes. When all have spoken, Trudy will engage them in a conversation and discussion. That will then be followed by the questions from all of you.

So let me introduce Trudy Rubin. She is foreign affairs columnist for The Philadelphia Inquirer and a member of its editorial board. Her twice-weekly column is widely syndicated. In 2001 she was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Commentary for her columns on Israel and the Palestinians. She is the author of Willful Blindness: The Bush Administration in Iraq. She is also a frequent commentator on “The News Hour with Jim Lehrer.”

Ms. Rubin has special expertise in the Middle East, Russia, and Eastern Europe, and travels abroad frequently. In the last four years, she has traveled to Iran and Iraq, Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, China, and South Korea. And in recent years she has visited Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria, Central Asia, Russia, and Georgia. That’s what you do if you are a foreign affairs columnist.

Before coming to The Inquirer, she wrote for the Christian Science Monitor and The Economist of London. During the spring of 1968, she worked in Prague as a radio correspondent. She has been a Jefferson
TRUDY RUBIN: It is a pleasure to be here. Let me say that, despite all the places I have traveled, Iraq has been my obsession over the last four years, with many trips there. I can’t think of a more important topic to be discussing than the question of morality and withdrawal from Iraq.

I believe that there are many people who may feel that we are going nowhere in security terms in Iraq; they can see no light at the end of the tunnel. And yet, the moral issue affects how they think.

On the question of “What do we owe Iraqis? Does the justice (or injustice) of the intervention affect what we should do now?” Does 1991 — and I can tell you that I was down in south Iraq and saw what Saddam did there when we let him do it — does that affect the debate? Does the gassing of Haladja, where I have also been? Is staying on imperialism?

What is the responsibility of a nation that not just takes down a ruler but takes down a structure and leaves such a fragmented system that there is no clear leadership waiting to lead the country, and if we leave, a civil war might become much worse? What is the responsibility when you don’t know whether staying on will do more than simply plug the dyke, when you don’t know for sure if you will ever be able to get out; but on the other hand, if you leave, things will become worse?

And what is the responsibility of the individual citizen in all of this, and the soldier? One of the most interesting moral debates going on during this war has been the debate among military people themselves. Some of you might have read the book *Dereliction of Duty* by H.R. McMaster, a colonel who is about to go back for his second tour, about what is the responsibility of soldiers for speaking out.

So, all in all, I think that this is a crucially important topic.

Peggy Steinfels showed me a quote before I came on, and I think it is really relevant, by Anthony Cordesman from CSIS. He said: “The U.S. will ultimately be judged far more by how it leaves Iraq and what it leaves behind than how it entered.” With that point, I will introduce the first of our speakers.

Michael Walzer, whom I am sure you are all familiar with, is a political philosopher at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton. He is...
clearly very well known for his work on the morality of war. His *Just and Unjust Wars* is a classic, and the more recent *Arguing About War*. He is the co-editor of *Dissent* magazine and a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books* and *The New Republic*. Michael Walzer.

**MICHAEL WALZER**: It was a dogma of my political education that the question “What ought to be done?” always had a right answer. Now I know that that is false. Sometimes there is no right answer, even when we know that we have to do something.

Here are a few propositions to keep in mind when thinking about what to do in Iraq, where we don’t know — at least I don’t — what ought to be done. The propositions hold, I think, whether you believe that the war was wrong from the start or only wrong, though terribly wrong, in its execution.

First of all, whatever our philosophical inclinations, we are consequentialists for the moment. Neither staying on nor leaving Iraq is a categorical imperative. We have to figure out a strategy that produces the least bad results for the Iraqi people, for other people in the Middle East, and for American soldiers.

In making these calculations there is an order of moral priorities, shaped by what we have done in the past and by what we are capable of doing now.

Our first obligation is to ensure the security of the Kurds and the relative autonomy of Kurdistan. We have been involved with the Iraqi Kurds for a long time. We have betrayed them in the past, and we must not do that again.

Our second obligation is to prevent the massacre or a radical subordination of Sunni Arabs in what is almost certain to be a Shiite-dominated state. This is also very much in our interests, as helping the Kurds may not be, since our closest allies in the Arab world are Sunni countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. It may be that safety for the Sunnis will require some kind of autonomy, a version perhaps of the soft partition that has already been achieved in Kurdistan.

Our third obligation, but I could easily have put this first, is to guarantee the safety of all the people who have helped us directly in Iraq, or who have put themselves at risk by standing up for liberal and democratic principles in political parties, in labor unions, and NGOs. Perhaps we will have to offer these people — and there are a lot of them — refuge in the United States. But that would deprive any future Iraqi state of some of its most valuable citizens. It would obviously be better if a process of national reconciliation gave them a reasonable chance to survive and work
at home. We should aim at that. But right now it seems more likely that a great many Iraqis will need a refuge.

Our fourth obligation is to help pay the costs of resettling Iraqi refugees, both the 2 million who have crossed the border into Syria and Jordan and the million or more who have fled and are still fleeing from their homes to other parts of the country. It should be clear, given the extent of the Iraqi disaster, that resettlement doesn’t mean return. So it doesn’t depend on an improbable victory, or even on national reconciliation. It is necessary even in the absence of those two.

Our fifth obligation is to make sure that the Bush Administration’s early hopes for military bases and direct access to Iraqi oil don’t lead us to prolong our military presence. The only reason for staying on now, or for withdrawing slowly and partially, is to prevent a greater disaster than the one we have already, but not we alone, created.

Our sixth obligation is to find some way to continue the struggle, harder now than it was in 2003, against jihadist zealotry and terrorism. I don’t know whether Al Qaeda has operating capacity in Iraq, but people sympathetic to Al Qaeda clearly do, and it is entirely right for us to view those people as enemies. Fighting them may require a continuing military presence in the Sunni provinces, the only places where we seem to be having some success, though we should remember that this is success against terrorists who had no presence in Iraq until we opened the way for them to move in.

How do we meet these obligations? If the aim of our military effort is to give the Iraqi government a monopoly on the use of force, then the effort is clearly failing, maybe has clearly failed. There are local successes, but I can’t see how these add up to any larger success.

The political effort is also failing, chiefly because the Baghdad government we helped to create and are currently propping up is unpopular, corrupt, brutal, and radically ineffective. What we need now, though I am not optimistic about this either, is a strenuous diplomatic effort to get other countries usefully engaged, including the Europeans (and the new French government offers some possibilities here), all the neighboring states, and the United Nations.

When *The New Republic* posed a question similar to the one that we are addressing here, I wrote a piece called “Talk, Talk, Talk.” That is still my position. But talking will not produce decent results if we are in headlong military retreat.

We need to keep soldiers in the Kurdish north and probably in the Sunni west. But I don’t see how we can ask Americans to risk their lives fighting
the Shiite militias while we are supporting a government that they have effectively infiltrated and whose policies they often determine. So we should probably begin to disengage from the Shiite areas, which means from much of the country, as the British have done and are doing in the south. But I don’t think that we are ready yet, or morally entitled, to disengage from the country as a whole.

TRUDY RUBIN: Thank you very much.

Jean Bethke Elshtain also probably most of you know. She is Laura Spellman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School, currently holds the Thomas and Dorothy Levy Chair in the Foundations of American Freedom at Georgetown University. Written and/or edited twenty books, including *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*, *Jane Adams and the Dream of American Democracy*, and *Democracy on Trial*.

In 2006 she was appointed to the Council of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and she also delivered the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, which she is almost through fashioning into a new book.

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN: Thank you.

In the invitation to this event we were sent a description of the situation in Iraq that included the following words: “To the insurgency has been added a civil war between Sunni and Shiite forces marked by extraordinary sectarian violence. Neighboring countries are taking sides, regional instability is growing, reconstruction is stalled, economic instability is endemic, refugee numbers grow, and, to top it all off, Al Qaeda has regrouped internationally.”

Is this characterization of events compelling? I put the question because this gestures toward my first point. Much of what we have to say on exit and morality will depend upon our assessment of the state of things. That is, we cannot separate the morality of exit from the consequences of exit, not unless we exist in some rarefied Kantian realm where one should do the “right thing” and the consequences be damned.

Now, the assessment of things — (Is the glass half-full/half-empty? What do we think will happen in the future?) — got a plenary jolt in the arm, as you know, a few weeks ago with the publication of the O’Hanlon-Pollack piece in *The New York Times*, with these liberal Democrats pointing to what they take to be the verifiable progress of the military surge.

One sentence from what they had to say: “As two analysts who have
harshly criticized the Bush administration’s miserable handling of Iraq, we were surprised by the gains we saw and the potential to produce not necessarily ‘victory’ but a sustainable stability that both we and the Iraqis could live with.” That did not settle the debate, of course, because critics rightly pointed out that military improvement on the ground need not translate into political progress.

So how do we interpret the data, the incessant drumbeat of news? Realism without illusions would be best, and it is simply inherently difficult to sort that out, given just how hard it is to weigh and to sift the many accounts of events to which we are treated on a daily basis. So how we understand events will help to determine our understanding of the morality of exit.

Point 2: Should sustainable stability be the aim of a morality of exit?

Approaching exit and morality questions, as I do, from a Just War perspective, the aim of a justified intervention is always a just peace; that is, is the situation better from the standpoint of justice than the one that pertained prior to the military action?

Now, that would seem to set the bar pretty low where Saddam’s “republic of fear” is concerned. Certainly, one of the things that swayed my own preliminary thinking about the war in Iraq was the fact that an Arab Muslim friend of mine is involved in a massive project translating thousands of official Baathist documents seized during the first Persian Gulf War. Like the fascists and Stalinists, Saddam’s thugs kept meticulous records of their exquisitely refined regime of torture and terror. My friend could not and cannot even complete the telling of some of these horror stories that he has uncovered.

That said, a situation of endemic, unpredictable violence is no bargain either, and surely does not count as “sustained stability — or, as I have put it in my recent work, a “minimally decent state.”

Are the pieces in place that might cohere to accomplish such? I do not know. But this much is clear: if one has played a major role in an intervention, one’s responsibilities are correlatively greater than if one has played a minor role. Our responsibilities are great.

Gone are the days when the United States with its allies could simply, for example, write a new constitution for Japan, install a Japanese democracy that the Japanese maintain and cherish. When people say you can’t fight and install a new political order — it has been done, but it cannot be done in anything like the same way now, for a number of reasons.

As we all know, the Iraq war does not have the powerful political and moral imprimatur that fighting fascism and Japanese militarism did. And
moreover, the international climate, and I think our own political culture, would make such wholesale imposed change, if you will, even in the direction of democracy and human rights, impossible, even if it were desirable.

So the task of change primarily falls to citizens of a country. Given the inherent divisions in Iraq, divisions that we insufficiently calibrated, and given that the Iraqi leadership has stumbled so badly, is the situation beyond redemption?

One bright spot is that the so-called “insurgents” are uniformly hated for the murderous thugs that they are. Certainly the Iraqis do not want them to succeed. The worst possible outcome would be a murderous civil war without end. Here one can imagine a regional conflagration, and that must be avoided in every way possible.

My third and final point: We have a moral obligation to see this through so that we can be reasonably assured that after an American exit there will not be a violent deluge. You heard this from Michael Walzer. I am seconding the motion. This means we cannot for the foreseeable future exit altogether. A just occupation, and eventual withdrawal, cannot permit a bad situation to get worse.

We owe this much to the Iraqis, especially, as you have already heard, the tens of thousands who joined in the effort and who were and remain glad that the days of Saddam are behind them, despite the unsettlement. To abandon these people would be an art of moral dereliction of the most egregious kind.

Final question: How long must we play a significant role? Again, who knows? There is no “sell by” date on these kinds of efforts. To exit ethically, however, this much I am pretty sure of: We cannot, and must not, just walk away. Thank you.

TRUDY RUBIN: Sohail Hashmi is Associate Professor of International Relations and Alumnae Foundation Chair in the Social Sciences at Mount Holyoke College. His research focuses on comparative international ethics, particularly concepts of just war and peace, and on the study of religion in politics, particularly Islam in domestic and international politics. His most recent publications include two edited volumes, Islamic Political Ethics: Civil Society, Pluralism, and Conflict and Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives. He is currently writing a book, Islamic International Law and Public International Law: Convergence of Dissonance?

SOHAIL HASHMI: Thank you very much. Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.
Ever since the drumbeat of war against Iraq began to be sounded in September 2002, I have been reminded of Barbara Tuchman’s book, *The March of Folly*. “For a government’s policy or a nation’s courts of action to be considered folly,” Tuchman writes, “it must meet three criteria. First, it must be perceived in its own time as counterproductive to that group’s own self-interest, not just in hindsight. Second, a feasible alternative course of action must have been available when the policy was adopted. And third, the policy must be that of a group, not just a single individual.”

In all three respects I think George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq, and our nation’s acquiescence in this action, make the American misadventure in Iraq another case study in the march of folly.

We went into Iraq to uncover Saddam Hussein’s arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, at a time when the evidence for such an arsenal was inconclusive, and when UN weapons inspectors were in the country doing their jobs and asking for more time. Of course, we found no weapons of mass destruction, but we have succeeded in increasing the risk of nuclear proliferation in the region — not just in Iran, but through the inexorable logic of the security dilemma in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria; and, if proliferation takes place in these countries, then who knows what the Israeli reaction will be?

We went into Iraq to eliminate a regime allegedly tied to radical Islamic terrorists, in the face of all logic and evidence to the contrary. We found no such ties, but we have amply succeeded in creating a breeding ground for terrorists that will pose a threat for many, many years to come. We went into Iraq to liberate the Iraqi people from the tyranny of one of the most brutal and oppressive governments in the world. Instead, tragically, in many parts of the country today the Iraqis are prisoners in their own homes. The list of ironies is truly long, and it continues to grow. How can we morally extricate ourselves from this ever-growing web of irony?

Two years ago, as Peggy Steinfels has mentioned, many of us who were invited by the Fordham Center to address “The Ethics of Exit” suggested that the United States ought to withdraw from Iraq sooner rather than later, some of us suggested within the year. That was before the bombing of the Al-Askariya Mosque in Samarra, before the insurgency became a civil war, before Baghdad and other cities became religiously divided, with armed gangs of murderers enforcing the boundaries.

In spite of all the changes that have taken place in the past two years, I still believe that the United States should withdraw as soon as possible, leaving behind a small contingent to continue the training of Iraqi security forces that will be part of an international effort to stabilize the
Now of course, we are all familiar with the objections that are immediately raised whenever an American exit from Iraq is suggested.

First, we are told that our departure will increase sectarian violence and lead to the breakup of Iraq. Well, many parts of Iraq outside the Kurdish north are already gripped by sectarian violence, and indeed have already been ethnically cleansed. The lurking danger now is that of increasing violence within the Shiite population, a taste of which we saw recently when Karbala had to be evacuated of 1 million pilgrims when rival Shiite militias started gun battles in the heart of the city.

Iraq is already in many ways three states — autonomous Kurdistan in the north, an almost completely Shiite province in the south with Basra as its capital, and Anbar province in the west that is largely ruled by tribes with greater affinity to their Jordanian cousins and with little loyalty to the government in Baghdad.

Iraq resembles more and more Lebanon of the mid-1970s. Now, of course, in that crisis Syria intervened, with the blessing of the Arab League, to end the civil war. But the war continued for some fourteen years afterwards, and the Syrian military remained in Lebanon for thirty years. Is the United States prepared for such a commitment in Iraq?

Second, we are told that our departure will embolden the terrorists, who will then follow us back home. Now, this statement disregards the fact that our presence in Iraq is already emboldening the terrorists and providing radical Muslim groups with their principal recruiting motivation today. The fact that we are fighting some elements of Al Qaeda in Iraq does not mean that they are not simultaneously plotting attacks against Americans, and others, outside of Iraq. Al Qaeda is not a conventional army that can be pinned down in Iraq. It operates by seizing opportunities whenever and wherever it can find them.

Third, we are told that our departure will aid Iran in the creation of this alleged “Shiite Crescent” that will spread all the way from Iran into Lebanon, with Hezbollah being its western anchor. Well, ladies and gentlemen, I think this is one of the biggest canards of all. First of all, Iran is already the biggest beneficiary of American policies in Iraq. Its mortal enemy Saddam Hussein has been removed. The Shiites are political ascendants in Iraq. And, sooner or later, the U.S. will have to leave Iraq. The Iranians don’t. This doesn’t mean, however, that Iraq is likely to become a puppet of Iran should we leave the country. There is little to suggest in history that the ethnic divisions between Arabs and Persians will be surmounted by the common Shiite faith.
Moreover, there is little to suggest that there is any substance to this notion of a “Shiite Crescent” that has been touted by the likes of King Abdullah II of Jordan, King Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Now, instead of playing a constructive role in stabilizing and rebuilding Iraq, as many of us had hoped for, Arab leaders have engaged in nothing but outright fear mongering. So what if we leave Iraq soon, say, within the year, again leaving behind a small force in conjunction with a truly multilateral effort?

The civil war may continue, and it may even escalate. But, quite frankly, this is a war we cannot win for the Iraqis.

On the other hand, the shock of America’s departure may just provide the catalyst for the Iraqis to start working to resolve their own problems. America’s departure from Iraq may well provide the impetus for regional powers to play a constructive role, rather than watching Iraq burn as if it is in another city rather than in their own backyard. The terrorists won’t give up their battle, and they may even claim they have won. But so what? They are claiming that already. They are claiming that today.

Iran may increase its meddling in Iraq. But again, so what? Iran is meddling in Iraq today, along with Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and indeed the United States of America.

TRUDY RUBIN: Gerard Powers directs policy studies at the John B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He has degrees in theology and in law. Until 2004, he directed the Office of International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He served for ten years as a foreign policy advisor to the Bishops, including on the ethics of the use of force. His recent articles have examined the ethics of the use of force in Iraq, nuclear weapons, humanitarian intervention, and economic sanctions. He has also written on religion and U.S. foreign policy, the right to self-determination, and the role of religion in the conflicts in Northern Ireland and Bosnia Herzegovina.

GERARD POWERS: Thank you.

This is probably the toughest issue of ethics and international affairs that our country has faced in at least a generation. What I would like to try to do is make three points about the relative balance between what I see as the moral imperatives that our country faces and the consequentialist reasoning that, as Michael Walzer and Jean Elshtain and Sohail have said, has to be a key part of the moral analysis.

The first point is we have to distinguish between the ethics of intervention and the ethics of exit. For those of us who opposed the original
intervention in Iraq, it is tempting to conclude that since it was immoral to go in it must be immoral to stay. A number of Catholic Democrats recently wrote a letter to the U.S. Catholic bishops making this kind of argument. In 2002 and 2003 those same Catholic bishops said, with greater nuance than I can present here, that it was immoral to go into Iraq. Since then, however, they have not said it is immoral to stay, but instead have emphasized the need for a responsible transition. According to the bishops, “The U.S. intervention has brought with it a new set of moral responsibilities, to help Iraqis secure and rebuild their country and to address the consequences of the war for the region and the world.” In short, the U.S. intervention may have been an optional, immoral war, but the post-intervention U.S. involvement is not an optional moral commitment.

Second point: The central moral issue is not what serves U.S. national security interests and is not the nature and timing of U.S. military withdrawal, but rather the nature and extent of U.S. responsibilities to the Iraqi people.

The current debate on Iraq is focused on a host of issues related to probability of success and proportionality. These are crucial moral strategic questions. As ethicists like to say, “ought implies can.” If we don’t have a reasonable chance of success in Iraq, we don’t have a moral duty to keep trying.

And, of course, in ethics, as Michael Walzer has pointed out, consequences matter. If we are doing more harm than good, then we should reconsider our policies.

My concern is that the preoccupation with legitimate questions of success and proportionality is obscuring a more fundamental moral issue. Yes, “ought” implies can, and the good should outweigh the bad, but we can’t assess the “can” or calculate proportionality if we are not clear about the “ought.”

The preoccupation with an ethics of efficacy and a utilitarian calculus of “good” and “evil” has to be complemented by much more attention to an ethic of responsibility. Ron Paul’s aphorism, “We broke it, we bought it,” has a lot of moral merit. As Noel Feldman argued so well in his book What We Owe Iraq, “When the U.S. overthrew the Iraqi government and became the de jure occupying power, it incurred a host of legal and moral responsibilities to promote the common good of the Iraqi people until a legitimate and effective Iraqi government could take over those responsibilities.”

As a temporary substitute political authority, what the U.S. owes Iraqis is akin to what the U.S. owes its own citizens. In that respect, our duties to
Iraqis are not all that different morally than our duties to help the people of New Orleans recover from Hurricane Katrina. The fact that the U.S. is no longer the de jure occupying power does not absolve it of its residual, but still substantial, moral obligations to Iraqis. This is especially so given that what we broke is still very much broken.

There is a related reason that an ethical responsibility should be given more prominence in our public debate. The United States is hardly a disinterested humanitarian offering a helping hand to a country riven by ancient hatreds. Rather, the U.S. is deeply implicated in the turmoil in Iraq. The U.S. supported Iraq in its war against Iran, supported Saddam Hussein when he was committing genocide against the Kurds, devastated Iraq during the 1991 war and the ensuing embargo, overthrew its government in 2003, and then bungled the aftermath. The U.S. role in Iraq might not be ancient, but it is very much a part of the hatreds that are there. The United States can no more walk away with a clear conscience than a father can abandon the mother of his illegitimate child.

If we are clear about our moral obligations to Iraqis, we might want to significantly qualify two ways the debate is now being discussed.

According to Senator John Warner of Virginia, in addressing General David Petraeus last week, “The key question is what policies and strategies will best serve U.S. national security interests.” Certainly that is a question we must ask. But the harder question is: What policies and strategies will best serve the interests and well-being of the Iraqi people?

Similarly, the antiwar protestors and presidential candidates who speak glibly about ending the war in Iraq by withdrawing U.S. troops next year are focusing on only one part of the moral equation. They need to also ask: Will withdrawal of U.S. troops end the war between Sunnis and Shiites? Will it end the insurgency? Will it end the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks or the general criminality in Iraq?

This violence might end for Americans, but it won’t end for Iraqis. In fact, a precipitous U.S. withdrawal, driven by a narrow conception of U.S. moral responsibilities, could contribute to an ever deeper and widening spiral of violence that could, ironically, even resuscitate a reinvention for humanitarian and security reasons down the road.

Third — and this is a prudential point — given the robust nature of this U.S. obligation to Iraqis and the immensity of the task of nation building that the United States willfully undertook, prospects for success in Iraq should be measured more in decades than in months or years.

Patience is a virtue, but it is not a virtue that is always evidenced in U.S.
foreign policy. In Central America, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Somalia, to take just some recent cases from the 1990s, the U.S. record of sustained policy on its military interventions was spotty, at best. Even if there had been a plan and all had gone according to that plan in Iraq, would it have been reasonable to expect a stable, united Iraq, with an agreed constitution, a respected and effective government that could survive without substantial outside help — all of that in only four-plus years?

The fact that Iraq is a failed state that has descended into violence and chaos does not seem to me to be an argument for U.S. withdrawal but is an argument for finding more effective ways to meet our heavy responsibilities to Iraqis. Given what is at stake, the burden of proof it seems to me is on those who contend that it is simply impossible for the U.S. to meet these obligations.

To conclude, in 2003 millions took to the streets around the world to protest the imminent invasion of Iraq, protests that Pope John Paul II called “a sign of the awakened conscience of humanity.” The fact that we see relatively few mass protests today is a sign, I think, that, four-and-a-half years later, most people recognize that there are no morally clear or clean answers to the moral conundrums we face in Iraq.

U.S. policy in Iraq has suffered from a double moral failure. It was immoral to intervene in the first place, and in the years since the U.S. has willed the ends but it hasn’t willed the means. The U.S. voluntarily took on nation-building in 2003, but it has not committed the troops or the resources and it has not pursued the policies necessary to achieve that goal. The first moral failure made the second more likely.

Those who say it is too late and too costly to fix what we have broken obviously need to be taken very seriously, because they might be right. I fear, however, that a preoccupation with the inherently speculative and often short-term assessments of success and proportionality could worsen the second moral failure by allowing us to forget what we owe Iraqis and by minimizing the real risk of even more serious humanitarian disaster in the future.

Whether we have reached the point of futility in Iraq or should still try to salvage what moral integrity is still possible is not entirely clear to me. What should be clear, however, is the moral bankruptcy of the preventive war doctrine, which got us into this predicament in the first place.

TRUDY RUBIN: I think we have a very interesting collection of perspectives here. To sum up, I think the first two panelists — and correct me if I am wrong — are saying we must not make it worse; that is our moral responsibility. Sohail Hashmi is saying we can’t make it worse so we might as well get out now. Gerard Powers is saying “we broke it, we
have to fix it,” this is the clear moral imperative; it is not imperialism, it’s a moral obligation. Let me try to question these perspectives.

For those who think we can’t let it get worse, that’s our moral responsibility, in that construct there is no time line. I think this is the problem that many people have with this issue, even those who feel strongly moral obligation.

Do you in your own minds — Michael Walzer, Jean Elshtain — have a timeline after which you feel this moral responsibility goes away?

I would like to ask Sohail Hashmi — your hope seems to be, as is many who think we should get out sooner, that the shock might provide the catalyst. However, as you know well from the Lebanon example, the Middle East usually doesn’t work that way. If the U.S. pulled out, just as likely, and probably more likely, the result would be a vacuum, and neighbors, far from being impelled to cooperate with each other, Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, would probably feel compelled to help their proxies, and there would still be civil war along the seam line. The divisions of Iraq are not clear. There is plenty of ethnic cleansing yet to be done.

So if somebody could tell you that your construct is not correct, that the civil war would get immensely worse and would go on for fifteen years, as the Lebanon war did, until somebody sat on the Iraqis’ heads, as in the Taif Conference, what would your position then be?

And, perhaps, I could ask Gerard Powers also to comment on the “is there an end of moral responsibility?” question.

Why don’t we start with Michael Walzer?

**MICHAEL WALZER**: You want a short answer to the timeline question?

Let me start by just saying that I am very worried by the term “civil war,” which implies, as in the American case, two sides, the North and the South, the Shiites and the Sunnis. That is not the situation in Iraq today. The definitive fact about the conflict in Iraq is that nobody there has only one enemy, nobody. That makes it an incredibly complicated situation. My tendency when faced with that kind of complexity is to think small, to look at the pieces.

I think yes, we are going to have troops, I hope, in Kurdistan, I hope in small numbers. But we are going to have troops there for a very long time, and probably should. In other parts of Iraq, I hope a shorter time. In the Sunni provinces, we are currently working to build up the tribal chiefs and the Sunni militias, whom we were fighting only a couple of
years ago. That is probably a sensible thing to do, although it is in conflict with our support for the national government, since these people are the enemies of the national government. But it may make for some degree of security in those provinces, and that is what we should be aiming at there.

What we should be aiming at in Basra or in the south? Teally I don’t now. I am inclined in the Shiite areas to agree with Professor Hashmi that we probably do not have a constructive role to play there.

Can I make one more point about withdrawal?

TRUDY RUBIN: Please.

MICHAEL WALZER: We have 160,000 soldiers in Iraq. There are 90,000 contracted workers, also ours, because we brought them in and we would have to take them out. There are over 40,000 armored vehicles. There are immense military bases. It is not possible to get those troops out in a year unless we accept the wrath of the American Army. It took us four years to move an army out of Vietnam, and the ending was ignominious and horrible. We were not able to take out the people we should have taken out at the end of that time. So yes, there has to be at some point a major withdrawal of most American forces. It has to be done very carefully planned, and it will take a long time.

JEAN ELSHTAIN: I want to sign on with what my good friend and colleague Michael Walzer has said, but to add a few additional comments. I did say during the course of my brief presentation that there was no “sell by” date for these kinds of efforts. I would just underscore that, and to say that I think some of the calls for getting out immediately and getting out now are really irresponsible and violate the norm that Jerry Powers expressed so eloquently, namely an ethics of responsibility. I think that is a good bit of what animates at least some of us up here.

We are still in Europe, sixty years after the end of World War II. Indeed, our presence in Europe and our provision of security needs for the Europeans gave them an extraordinary peace dividend, so that throughout the years of the Cold War they could rebuild their societies and flourish, courtesy of the United States. We are still in the Korean Peninsula, again over sixty years after the truce that concluded that particular conflict.

So the notion that we would just turn about and head home, I think again flies in the face of most of our history. Michael did mention the ignominy of the departure from Vietnam, and we remember some of those horrific scenes. But I should hope that we wouldn’t repeat that. That is not an episode that we can lift up with any degree of honor or any sense of decency.
One issue I want to put on the table here is an issue for American citizens. I mentioned it briefly in a little Op-Ed not too long ago that I think came out in *Newsday*. That is the issue of patience. Jerry raised it in a way. Sustained efforts over time. Do we have a political culture now that can in fact sustain these kinds of efforts, the patience that is required? The temptation to say “this is costing way too much in all kinds of ways — American lives and dollars, and so on and so forth” is great, and one must understand that frustration. But again, I think that the responsibilities we have incurred are also great. In thinking about the morality of the issue, we do have to think about the fates of the Iraqis who, first and foremost, have signed on with us, but also what will happen in the aftermath should the United States abandon its responsibility.

SOHAIL HASHMI: I’m not quite sure where to start. Trudy, I promise I will come back to your question at the end. I would like to respond to a few comments of my distinguished fellow panelists.

I will begin by saying that I do agree with Michael Walzer that we have to now take small steps, as he put it, in trying to escape out of this morass that we are in. We can only, I think, at best now act on the basis of moral humility, rather than moral extravagance of the sort that we have seen in the past few years, in attempting to rebuild Iraq, rebuild Iraqi society, rebuild Iraqi government. So to that extent I agree with him. I don’t disagree with any of the suggestions that he has said. But my vision of America’s withdrawal, I guess, the process is telescoped. I am trying to get to what I see as the inevitable step that we will take down the road, sooner rather than later.

Now, in response to Jean Elshtain’s comment about our continued presence in Europe, that is certainly true. The rebuilding of Germany and the rebuilding of Japan were held up as models of what we were trying to do in Iraq. But with all due respect, Iraq and the entire Middle East are not Europe. The region is not analogous to either Germany or Japan. There is a long history of imperialism in the Arab world. That history is still very much alive and remembered and a sore point for many Arabs. We may have the best of intentions, the most noble of commitments, a sense of our responsibility to make right what we have done wrong, as Jerry Powers very notably outlined, but these are our perceptions of our responsibility. Are they shared by people in the region, or do they resent the fact that we are coming in with such high-minded idealism and don’t see it as idealistic at all?

Finally to Trudy’s question, I am not suggesting that Lebanon be entirely a model or that it need be the model of what happens in Iraq. Syria was the sole country to intervene, of course if we don’t consider Israel. Syria was the country sent in by the Arab League to sort of clamp down, as you
said, on the violence and to provide some kind of stability as the country transitioned towards normalcy. That was a very long period. I am not suggesting that at all. I am suggesting much more of a multilateral effort. I don’t think we have given multilateralism a chance. We rushed into the war. We have basically kept this particular effort largely an American effort. With our presence, 160,000 troops, there is, quite frankly, no incentive for other parties to get involved. They are saying, “If 160,000 of the best troops in the world cannot alleviate the situation, then what can the rest of the world do?” So the impetus for multilateralism has not been there.

I think our withdrawal, concomitant with an increased role for regional agencies like the Arab League, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which I argued for two years ago, and indeed the United Nations, that should be the replacement for America’s commitment.

Finally, the civil war: Will it escalate, will it rage? Well, it may rage, it may escalate, but it is already raging and escalating in many parts of Iraq. As my fellow panelists have said, we don’t have the means to respond to this escalating conflict. Are we prepared as a nation to provide the means to truly and effectively address the increasing violence in that country?

GERARD POWERS: On the timeline question, Senator Carl Levin, who is the Chair of the Armed Services Committee, is one of the most respected and eloquent advocates of a fixed timeline. He argues that a timeline will force the Iraqis to look into the abyss of a civil war or building a nation. If that is the approach we take, it seems to me that that is kind of like playing a game of chicken — except we are putting all the moral risks of that game on the Iraqis at a time when we know that they do not have the capacity politically, in terms of security, or economically to play that game. So that is my concern about the deadline.

Is there a time when our responsibilities end? In 1971 the U.S. Catholic Bishops decided that the Vietnam War had gotten to the point where there wasn’t a reasonable probability of success and our cost was disproportionate to any good that could be achieved. I think that would probably be the argument that you could make for a withdrawal from Iraq — that there is no longer a reasonable probability of success, so we must withdraw even knowing that there would be all kinds of untoward consequences.

If you were to do that, I don’t think your responsibilities to the Iraqi people have ended, but what you will have to do is mourn the moral failure of U.S. policy originally, the moral failure for going in in the first place, and the moral failure associated with a failed occupation.

We should remember that the reason many of us who were opposed to the
war were so opposed was partly the preventive war doctrine that helped justify it, but the other part was precisely because that we did not want to get into the moral conundrums that we are now in. But now that we face this moral mess, we’ve got to deal with it.

TRUDY RUBIN: Just to pick up on one point that was raised here, I think it was Senator Barak Obama who said this week when speaking on Iraq that we couldn’t prevent massacres everywhere. What I’m wondering is this: What do you think would be the moral consequences if, because the United States, say, decided, or the Congress decided, that we cannot solve Iraq’s sectarian and ethnic difficulties, we started pulling out, and as we pulled out troops at an accelerated rate, ethnic cleansing on a much larger scale started both in Baghdad and along the seam lines?

In my view, there have been a lot of loose statistics about the percentage of ethnic cleansing in Baghdad, but there are still, I believe, far more Sunnis than the figures show. So if the TV cameras, presuming they could still stay there, were showing massive killing as we pulled out from this intermediate position we are holding in many mixed areas, as our troops left — apart from whether there would be a rout — what would be the moral consequences for our foreign policy do you think in the future?

JEAN ELSHTAIN: May I make just one very brief comment?

TRUDY RUBIN: Please.

JEAN ELSHTAIN: That is the fact that you cannot prevent massacres everywhere doesn’t mean that you don’t have the responsibility to try to prevent massacres somewhere. That somewhere is in a situation where you have helped to create the conditions under which these massacres are likely to occur. So I don’t think that is a very compelling point made by Senator Obama, that particular point.

As to the scenario, Trudy, that you have described, it seems to me that in fact the decent opinion of humankind at that point would be so repulsed by what was happening that we would be under considerable — and I think correct — pressure to try in fact to reintroduce ourselves in a situation that we had abandoned in order to stop, at least to try to interdict, the fighting sides, if you will, to try to prevent worse massacres.

So to try to avoid that before the situation gets worse, it seems to me, knowing that we are all operating with a certain degree of uncertainty and probabilities about what is likely to happen, is terribly important.

TRUDY RUBIN: Let me just make one quick point. It reminds me of when Ronald Reagan went into Beirut after the massacres at Sabra and Shatila. Well actually, there had been troops there before. There was a
pullback, then there was a return because of massacres. One does wonder in this situation.

Michael Walzer.

**MICHAEL WALZER:** I think Senator Obama is wrong in another sense. We do have an obligation, not to stop every massacre, but to help to stop every massacre, to try to stop it, to encourage other people to stop it, to pay for armed forces that might stop it. Nobody, no human being, is off the hook when mass murder is going on, and certainly not the most powerful state in the world.

**TRUDY RUBIN:** Did either of you want to respond to that?

**SOHAIL HASHMI:** I just wanted to say one thing with regard to the Sabra and Shatila case. Sabra and Shatila became possible because, under the withdrawal agreement that the U.S. brokered between Israel and the PLO, the PLO fighters evacuated the refugee areas, the refugee camps. They basically left the Palestinian refugees under the care, arguably, of the Israeli military. That is what made possible the infiltration of the falangist militia into the camps to commit the massacre.

Now, in Iraq we have a totally separate situation. I don’t know of a single party in the Iraqi mosaic, if you will, that is not armed to the teeth at this point. They are all armed. They know that they have basically no assurance of protection from any party other than their own militias. So there is a proliferation of militias.

Michael Walzer is absolutely right, there are multiple cleavages in this particular struggle, and the cleavages are constantly shifting. So today we are touting the great successes that we are now seeing in Anbar province, where we have rallied the tribes against Al Qaeda. I assure you, the longer we stay in Anbar province, the more the tribes will turn against us. And indeed, if we do continue to maintain a presence in Kurdistan, we will be resented by the Kurds as well.

Quite frankly, I am not quite sure why Michael is so concerned about the Kurds, because they have learned a lesson from the first Gulf War. They are not going back to the time when they are going to be at the mercy of a powerful Iraqi military. They are going to do everything possible to assure a fragmentation of the central government, and that includes the Iraqi army. So I don’t see the Kurds as being in danger. In fact, I think the Kurds are at this point the most cohesive group, and certainly the best protected.

**TRUDY RUBIN:** Let me just add a point here, since Iraq is my obsession. The Kurds are endangered by the possibility of an Iraq crack-
up, because under those circumstances — Iran is already shelling Iraqi villages because Iranian Kurdish separatists are holing up in the mountains of Kurdistan. They have driven 3,000 Iraqi Kurdish families out of their homes. The Turks are doing the same; they already have troops in Kurdistan. So the Kurds do have to worry, and they desperately want an American base up there. Whether that makes any sense is another issue which I won’t get into.

The fact that the militias are girding I think also speaks to this question. The problem is we don’t know for sure and one can only make calculated assessments. You look at the makeup of Baghdad, and there are still many areas where minorities are holding on. You might argue that if we stayed for another year, all Baghdad will be already ethnically cleansed, and then the agreement might be simpler. But right now, if we left in the next year, there is still a lot of movement and a lot of militia fighting. So one could surmise that it would get worse.

I think I cut off Gerard.

GERARD POWERS: Just a quick point. I think we have a humanitarian crisis in Iraq right now. If the U.S. were not there, if it were happening without any outside powers involved, I think we would be having a forum right now on whether humanitarian intervention was required in Iraq.

TRUDY RUBIN: That raises a very important issue. Why, given the enormity of the humanitarian crisis in Iraq in terms of internal displaced and refugee outflow, more than 2 million flowing out and up to 30,000–60,000 a day, says the International Organization on Migration, still fleeing daily, except that Jordan has closed the border and Syria is going to close the border at the end of Ramadan — would this massive refugee crisis, with Syria and Jordan unable to provide services, with very little prospect of going home again, with internal displacement increasing at the same rate, why is this issue below the radar screen — although Ted Kennedy, bless him, has been pushing it and pushing it, and finally the morality of it seems to have hit some Republican senators?

But I am curious. How does that moral issue fit into the picture? Does anyone want to speak to that? You started speaking to that.

JEAN ELSHTAIN: We have both spoken to that issue already, the fact that we do have a keen responsibility, that I think hopefully could be met in a number of ways, and not just by us alone, to find ways to process the refugees who are trying to get out more rapidly. It is shameful the rate at which people are not able to get approval to come here, for example, those who want to come to the States, and to do whatever we can about that. But here, surely, with this refugee crisis, you would think that this would be something that the United Nations might want to take some responsibility
for and so on.

But I think that it is beneath the radar screen in the United States. In part because the sheer vitriol surrounding the debate about Iraq and the politics of it, the choreography of the politics of it, in the midst of the run-up to a presidential campaign, it seems to me that makes it very difficult for many of these kinds of issues to rise to the top of our level of concern.

TRUDY RUBIN: Well, there are other moral issues too. The United Nations has launched a massive appeal, and nobody is giving money.

JEAN ELSHTAIN: Nobody is paying any attention.

TRUDY RUBIN: The U.S. has given $30 million for education, but that’s a pitance compared to the need. You have hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children not going to school now.

JEAN ELSHTAIN: But, of course, the UN will not function on the ground. It is not prepared to make a commitment on the ground.

TRUDY RUBIN: That’s inside Iraq. I’m talking about in Syria and in Jordan. But what is the moral imperative regarding when you decide that these people are permanent refugees, because morally there always is the hope and the encouragement that you would be able to send them home again? In fact, that is the premise on which the U.S. is hiding from this image. So do you accept that they are never going home again now and try to resettle them, as we did after Vietnam, when in a matter of eight months President Gerald Ford let 131,000 Vietnamese into the United States? Is that what we should be doing?

MICHAEL WALZER: It is certainly what we should be doing. But it is a very small part of the problem. Everybody talks about internationalizing the conflict and bringing in the UN and the Europeans and the Arab League, and that would certainly be a very good thing to do, if they showed any inclination to come in.

Now certainly, the unilateralism of the Bush Administration has not encouraged any kind of international effort. But I have my doubts that an American departure is going to result in any kind of constructive presence of Europeans on the ground or UN forces on the ground. And I expect that the Arab League will play as constructive a role in Iraq as it is now playing in Sudan. Why would it be any different?

TRUDY RUBIN: I have some questions from the audience here. I am going to throw in a couple of questions now. There is one more I would like to ask.
“If we have good intentions in Iraq, how do we excuse our bad intentions regarding torture and detainment? It is easier to believe our intentions in Iraq are really bad.” Well, this gets into another issue about oil, which maybe we can save. But how do you square things that fall under a category of immorality with what we should do for morality? Does the fact of these issues of torture and detainment, not to mention the amount of death of civilians already accumulated in Iraq, say that we are not fit to stay on?

MICHAEL WALZER: Human beings have mixed motives. You must know that. And states, which are made up of human beings, also have mixed motives. I mean there were imperial civil servants in Washington who were interested in Iraqi oil and military bases and nothing else, and there were other people in Washington who were interested in creating a secular democratic republic in Iraq. Both of those, and many other motivations, played a part. But you cannot deny that there was this motivation of democratization.

Early on I thought that the closest historical parallel to the U.S. army marching on Baghdad in 2003 to create a democratic society in Iraq was the Red Army marching on Warsaw in 1919 to create a communist society in Poland. Equally improbable projects. And certainly there were base motives accompanying both of them, but there was also a certain kind of high reckless idealism which played a major part in producing this war and this disaster.

TRUDY RUBIN: Just let me ask you one follow-up on that because I think it is such an important point. Some people have asked in here — and the question often comes up — this high-minded, but maybe misguided, idealism many people just equate with high-minded “do goodism” and/or imperialism. So how do you balance the charge that our trying to make things better is imperialist meddling, versus the moral need to rectify the damage and the breakage and create some kind of stable situation in Iraq before we leave?

JEAN ELSHTAIN: Let me just add a bit here. That is, I think that if we see this idealism, the democratization imperative, as nothing but a disguised form of pernicious imperialism, than we in fact really demean and demean the tens of thousands of Iraqis who signed on with that effort. I am on the Board of the National Endowment for Democracy and their projects in Iraq. It is astonishing the number of people — labor unions, women’s groups, newspaper publishers, others — who took all of this very seriously, who indeed already cherish these kinds of ideals, and who saw the American intervention as a way for them to realize these in practice. I don’t think it is imperialistic when people embrace certain ideals for
liberal democratic self-government.

Now, Michael is quite right. If you are looking for pure motives in this world, you will be searching to the end of your days and never find it. Motives, indeed, are always mixed. But we should never think that in the Iraq situation the decent motives are not only swamped by some more ignoble motives, but that in fact we can discount the decent motives altogether. Again, in so doing we undercut, I think, the sincere, genuine, forthright, and perhaps even now tragic, efforts and activities of all those Iraqis who took this very, very seriously indeed.

TRUDY RUBIN: That raises an interesting question, which was brought up by someone in the audience. Basically, if an authoritarian regime took over in Iraq now, and possibly the Iraqi people — I know so many Iraqis who wanted democracy who say now they want another dictator — if an authoritarian regime took over in Iraq now and if it could bring peace and security, does our moral responsibility demand holding out for a democratic government?

JEAN ELSHTAIN: That’s yours, Jerry.

GERARD POWERS: That’s a good question. I think that it would be a lesser evil situation. Again, it is a question of the probability of success — is there a reasonable prospect that you have any alternative? What kind of authoritarian regime? There are better and worse kinds of authoritarian regimes. If this were a more benign authoritarian regime that was providing security, was helping the economy get back on its feet, was not severely repressive — you know, one might think of Singapore — then I think it is more morally tolerable.

In any case, I think that the goal certainly of some in the Administration was to use military force — I think it was naïve and messianic — to catalyze democracy and human rights throughout the Middle East. It failed. It should be our goal to help the Iraqis establish as democratic a government as possible. But if you end up with a fairly benign authoritarian regime, I think you could have to live with it as a lesser evil, if that’s the best we can do.

TRUDY RUBIN: Another question: “If we decide that morally we must stay in Iraq, is it moral to do that with just 130,000 troops? If we must stay, should we not mobilize the entire nation to do so — conscription, taxes dedicated to the effort? Otherwise is it not an immoral calling?”

Anyone want to take that?

GERARD POWERS: I think this is willing the ends and not the means. We willed the ends, in a sense, but everybody knew ahead of time, given
our culture, especially our political culture, that we would never put the means in that would be necessary to do the nation-building that we undertook. That is the part of the moral tragedy.

JEAN ELSHTAIN: A very brief comment. Embedded in the question seems to me the suggestion that unless a nation — ours in this case — is mobilized for something like a total war effort, a la World War II, that we likely don’t fully believe in what we are doing, that we are likely to be engaged in an effort that isn’t morally defensible. That raises lots of really interesting questions about the whole issue of limited wars, the role of the military and the rest of the country, the fact that for most of us, unless we watched television or picked up a newspaper, we wouldn’t know this was happening. We are not making sacrifices. There is something deeply troubling about that.

But it does seem to me that the reality of the world as we know it is that there will be armed interventions of various sorts that require different degrees of mobilization and different degrees of citizen involvement and sacrifice. I think the problem began with Iraq — I think Jerry is exactly right — that we willed certain ends but we didn’t at the outset will certain means. I don’t think by enormously increasing our presence at this point and saying that the end that we willed is still valid, that that would yield the outcome that most of us here see as a lesser evil.

I think what all of us are saying is that that outcome that was willed is simply not in the cards at this point in time and that we have to settle for something else.

TRUDY RUBIN: Go right ahead.

SOHAIL HASHMI: I’m a little bit confused. Last month, according to AP estimates — they are keeping tabs on civilian casualties in Iraq — they estimated 1,800 Iraqi civilians were killed just last month.

JEAN ELSHTAIN: There were 500 in that village, just by the insurgents.

SOHAIL HASHMI: Right. And that was the day after the U.S. military announced that we were making significant progress, especially in that part of the country.

So my question is very simple: If 160,000 American troops are not capable of preventing 1,000, 1,500, 1,800 civilian casualties per month, then how many American troops is it going to take? This is an unanswerable question. The more we escalate, the more we create ripple effects, not only in Iraq but throughout the region, and in fact we exacerbate the situation.
**TRUDY RUBIN:** I just want to add something to that point. I think you can tell from what I have said that I believe we have a moral responsibility to stay longer. And yet, this is a question that says: “Most moral theory involves some balancing of benefits and harms. Surely among such harms in Iraq are the large numbers of civilian victims,” the issue that was just raised. We know the various claims of numbers. Now, this questioner asks: “Does the U.S. government have a moral obligation to determine that number and make the number known?” That’s one question.

Another question arises from a discussion that I had with a couple of Iraqi friends in my last trip there in June, both of them people who had supported the invasion because they had lost people to Saddam. What they said to me was that they were debating with their families whether it would be better to go through hell for perhaps a year, even if more were slaughtered, and get it over with — I think they presumed a new dictator would arise — rather than go through hell for ten more years. Now, there is an assumption there that the hell would be over in a year.

But it is an interesting question. I don’t know. I think there is a moral angle to it somewhere, in terms of our responsibilities to Iraqis. Could you make a case? First, should we publicize all the numbers, keeping tabs? Second, is there a case to be made that if we can’t solve it soon it would be better to let all hell break loose rather than continue the suffering? How would you approach that from a moral point of view?

**MICHAEL WALZER:** First of all, we certainly have a responsibility to keep track of civilian casualties, which we apparently have not been doing in Iraq, and in Afghanistan also. It is crucial to arguments about justice in the conduct of war that you have to make proportionality calculations and proportionality arguments, and you cannot do that if you are pretending that there are no civilian casualties or that we don’t know how many there are. So that is a moral imperative because it makes moral reasoning possible. Not doing it makes moral reasoning impossible.

Now, I don’t know how to calculate a year of concentrated hell against ten years of slow death. That’s not a humanly possible calculation.

**TRUDY RUBIN:** It’s a horrible fact that a lot of people are talking that way in Iraq. I think it does reflect on our moral culpability, even if one cannot approach it from a moral perspective.

“How much weight in our deliberations should be given to polls that seem to establish that a majority of Iraqi people want U.S. troops to leave and regard attacks on U.S. troops as acceptable? Where does that fit into the moral calculus?”
GERARD POWERS: Ultimately, if we respect the self-determination rights of the Iraqi people, which is what we have to do in order to avoid being an imperialist presence in Iraq, we have to abide by the wishes of the Iraqi government, assuming there is one that is representative of the people and can speak for the Iraqi people. So if we are asked to leave, we should leave.

The polls, I suspect, right now in Iraq are very tenuous. Polling is a very tenuous business. Given the situation there, the conditions make polling, I imagine, very difficult. So I’m not sure how much we can trust polls. I don’t think you would rely on polls to determine whether we leave or not. It should be an established governmental authority that asks us to leave.

JEAN ELSHTAIN: I just want to second that very briefly and say that the polling data changes very rapidly, as I’m sure you know, depending on whether it has been a good week or a bad week, and so on and so forth. I have seen polls that show a rather different argument from the Iraqis than the one familiar to the person who wrote the question.

I quite agree that we can’t go by the ephemera of polling data. But certainly, the Iraqi government has to pay attention to measures of public concern and public will and, presumably, in some way reflect those. So if, indeed, it were the case that there seemed to be some overwhelming sense of urgency from Iraqis — and again, it is very difficult, given all the divisions we have talked about, to even speak like that — that the United States presence is making things worse, I suspect that the Iraqi government at that point would ask us to stand down, to find a way to do that. That, as you know, has not happened.

TRUDY RUBIN: I just would add something to that. I think one of the very interesting things that anyone who has spent time in Iraq finds out is that Iraqis themselves are very conflicted. You can ask the question “Do you want U.S. troops to leave?” and often the answer will be “yes” because people are so angry. They cannot understand that Americans are not doing this deliberately. They can’t believe that this superpower could have made such a mess without having ulterior motives. So they are furious. But then if you say, “Do you want troops to leave tomorrow? — and I have done this over and over again over the last four years — the answer that you often get is, “Well, you can’t leave. You can’t leave until you stabilize the country.”

So there is a very schizophrenic feeling. People want the Americans to perform. The Americans haven’t performed, so they want them to leave.

“An integral part of an ethical exit is a moral accounting for the original sin or intervention that led to catastrophe. Can the U.S. be a credible or
constructive player in Iraq or elsewhere without an honest mea culpa by American leaders?"

JEAN ELSHTAIN: Jerry, you talked about that a bit. I think Michael wants to weigh in on this as well. It is a very good question and a very interesting one.

Those of us who work in the just or justified war tradition have talked for a few years about the fact that we have pretty well-developed criteria for assessing whether an intervention at the outset is justified or not, or if we are thinking about the means being deployed during a conflict, and a less robust and less rich set of criteria and understanding for what happens after, for just post bellum. I think in a way this is a post bellum question.

If, indeed, the sober reflection that you are hearing tonight is the one that pertains, as the United States finds a way to take its leave, hopefully without making the situation worse, I should think that the kind of debate the questioner calls for will be absolutely essential — and not just the mea culpas.

We are going to be talking about this and assessing this for a long time to come. The lessons that we have learned, hopefully, will take a while to sort out. But the moral regret doesn’t have to wait upon that historic assessment. I think that could occur, and should occur, much sooner. But it’s not just the responsibility of our political leaders. Within the ethical framework I am talking about, citizens also take on this kind of responsibility and need to engage in these kinds of reflections as well, in order that they might at some future point better reflect on a new conflict, a new set of concerns, a possible humanitarian intervention, that cries out for some relief.

The worst possible outcome, it seems to me, here would be to say: “Yeah, we made a mess of it, we’re really sorry,” and then for that not to make its way into the way in which we systematically assess situations in the future. I have a worry that — we talk about “Vietnam syndrome” — there will be a kind of “post-Iraq war syndrome” that will in fact invite many to take up what in effect is a kind of isolationism and to turn their backs on many of the humanitarian crises that the world now sees. I suspect that one reason we haven’t done what we I believe should have done in Darfur, even though there were genocides, is because we were completely tied up in the Iraq situation. That would not be a good outcome.

I think that our reflection on what our responsibilities are and the failure to exercise those in a way that yielded a decent outcome in Iraq, that those two things should go together, and not that we therefore have very few responsibilities of any kind.
MICHAEL WALZER: There are so many things for which we should be doing penance. The list would have to be long. We will spend, I expect, years talking about it and arguing about it.

But there is one very concrete thing. We will, and we should, pay reparations for what we have done in Iraq, which will partly be helping the resettlement of refugees, and taking in people ourselves, and massive investment in the reconstruction of Iraq someday when that becomes possible. It is in the nature of reparations that the burden is distributed through the tax system to all of us, those who supported the war and those of us who opposed the war, everybody. And that is right in a democratic society. Those of us who opposed the war did not succeed in winning the argument and in stopping the war. We don’t believe in collective guilt, but there is a certain kind of collective responsibility. Reparations are one very concrete way of recognizing that.

GERARD POWERS: I want to say briefly there is a growing literature on the political role of forgiveness. Don Shriver at Union Theological here in New York has written a wonderful book. Bill Bole wrote an interesting book on the political role of forgiveness as part of the Woodstock Theological Project at Georgetown.

It is really interesting what this complicated process of reconciliation can bring to international affairs as a very important dimension of healing the divisions within countries after war and also healing the divisions between countries. We shouldn’t underestimate how long and how difficult a process that is. I was involved in writing a statement on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, where we had a discussion about whether or not the United States government should apologize for the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was mostly the lay people on our committee who were of the World War II generation who could not imagine that the U.S. Catholic bishops would call for such a thing. That’s fifty years later.

So we shouldn’t, I think, think it is going to be an easy prospect for the American people, much less our government, to come to the place where we are willing to apologize for the moral failures in Iraq.

JEAN ELSHTAIN: There are other ways to express regret, though, of course. I think Michael has suggested what some of those would be, some very practical concerns.

TRUDY RUBIN: This is a very interesting question: “Is it possible that there would be an ethics of responsibility playing a part in the upcoming political campaign? Given the growing popular impatience with the war and the preoccupation with garnering votes, what are the chances of a carefully formulated policy in this climate by any of the candidates?”
JEAN ELSHTAIN: We are not rushing to answer that.

Michael, do you want to take it?

Fools rush in. I don’t want to say nil. I think they are rather slim. Although perhaps a little ray of hope maybe. Perhaps, once we get past the primary season and we have the two major candidates, there will be possible entry points, it seems to me, that will emerge where this kind of discussion might occur. Whether the candidates and their handlers and so forth — and the polling data, what it shows, and so on — will take those occasions in order to have this kind of discussion, we don’t know. I wouldn’t wait with bated breath. But I do think it is terribly important.

What it also suggests is that this discussion quite likely will have to be carried forward by others and kept alive — you coming to events like this, people in the media, people in the clergy, in NGOs, people in the professorate — so that this question of an ethics of responsibility is part of the national dialogue, even though it might not be playing a central role in the political campaign, alas.

TRUDY RUBIN: When we look to the future and the moral implications of where we are now and how it is likely to play out, there are several questions here touching on this issue of imposing democracy. How do you think this should or may morally impact the issue of whether we should even try to impose or bring or promote democracy abroad, and especially in the Middle East, where, as has been pointed out, there is such sensitivity to the historic role of imperialism?

SOHAIL HASHMI: That’s a very important question. Again, I think America’s involvement in Iraq has been more detrimental to the progress of democracy than it has been beneficial. There is nothing wrong with promoting democracy. In fact, I think all of us here on this panel in many ways argued well before the American invasion that the problem of Saddam Hussein had to be dealt with and that the United States had a positive obligation to do much more to promote democracy and democratization in the Arab countries.

The problem is, of course, that the United States has talked a lot about democracy but, as is characteristic of many Western powers, it has promoted democracy with rhetoric but often not acted behind the rhetoric, not been consistent in its actions.

There was a genuine, I think, upsurge towards democracy in the Arab countries following the American invasion of Iraq. There were remarkable successes that were achieved initially. I think Bush was correct to tout some of the legitimate successes. We had a rather rapid
transition to a coalition provisional authority, a rapid drafting of the constitution and its implementation, and the holding of, not just one, but a number of elections, both at the national and at the provincial levels. All of these things I think were to the credit of the Iraqi people as much as they were to the American presence in the country. But certainly, the United States played, I think, an important role in bringing about the initial start towards democracy there.

Well, a number of things have happened since. Of course, the disintegration of Iraq. That has not given much confidence to neighboring countries, neighboring Muslim populations, that in fact democracy is an answer to the problems of tyranny and authoritarianism. If you are Hosni Mubarak or if you are King Abdullah of Jordan, you can say to your own people, “Do you want this in your country? I’m keeping the peace. I am holding the country together. If you want carnage, if you want the Islamists, the fundamentalists, to take over power, then yes let’s have democracy. But if you want stability, if you want law and order, then I am the person to bring it about.”

A second thing that has happened, and it has had a tremendous impact upon the democratization efforts in the Middle East, is America’s role in the summer war in Lebanon in 2006. The view in the Arab countries is that the United States was complicit, if not directly involved, in the heavy bombardment of Lebanon. That heavy bombardment destroyed the Lebanese infrastructure. The purpose was to weaken Hezbollah, but in reality what we have done is weaken the democratically elected government of Lebanon. We stood by and watched while this government teetered and tottered, lost credibility with its own people, and certainly has lost credibility with many Arabs, many Muslims, around the world, and in fact with pro-democracy groups in other Arab countries. They are saying, “The United States promotes democracy, but when the test comes the United States has consistently failed.”

JEAN ELSHTAIN: Very quickly, I don’t think we could stem the democratic tide if we wanted to in many parts of the world. I mentioned that I am on the Board of the National Endowment for Democracy. The National Endowment for years has funded dozens of democracy-promotion projects in the Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East, including projects in the Palestinian Territories, which are flourishing, that have to do with press issues, religious freedom issues, women’s issues, labor issues, and so on. These are all very small scale. They are local. They are trying to build up a civil society infrastructure. They are not the big regime-change kinds of things. The United States is deeply involved. These are people who come to the National Endowment to seek small grants for these kinds of projects. Staff goes there to work with them, but all the initiative comes from folks on the ground.
So all these kinds of things are going on, and they are terribly important. It would be a tragedy if the United States were to pull out of its support for those kinds of efforts. If you have the chance to build up a kind of proto-democratic infrastructure, that is terribly important in trying to sustain more robust and visible democratic efforts over time.

**TRUDY RUBIN:** You know, we are talking here about ethics of responsibility now and in the future. I think this discussion touches on whether what has happened in Iraq will give the impression abroad that we are interested less in the ethics of responsibility and more in the operations of imperialism, or what have you. The concept that we are discussing probably would seem unbelievable to a lot of people overseas.

I have a question here that touches on what probably is perceived abroad as the basis of what we are doing. I don’t think it was, but if Alan Greenspan says so — “If Alan Greenspan is correct, our presence in Iraq is all about oil. So what is the moral justification of that basis for our policy?”

Alan Greenspan — I haven’t read the book, but I have seen him in interviews. He has backtracked. I don’t think he exactly said this. But it certainly is the way the policy is perceived. I wonder: Does it matter if people abroad do not believe in the ethics of those who say they have a moral responsibility to see this end better? Is that an issue?

**MICHAEL WALZER:** First, there was no problem with buying oil from Saddam Hussein. He was more than willing to sell oil to the United States and to let American companies come in. And had we guaranteed the stability, the permanence, of his regime, we could be swimming in Iraqi oil. So if this was a war fought for oil, it was fought by idiots, because they already had the oil or had full access to it. That’s the kind of leftist argument that discredits the left. We shouldn’t be making that argument.

**TRUDY RUBIN:** I can’t resist adding a point here, because I argued against this concept so many times to readers of my column. In Kuwait, which we rescued from oblivion, the Kuwaiti Parliament has yet to accept a law that the ruling family has wanted, which would allow foreign oil companies to get production-sharing agreements with a better percentage of profit. Nationalism is so strong in the region, the current oil law that the U.S. is promoting, not a takeover, is being repelled by the Kuwaiti Parliament.

This was never a possibility that we were going in there to take oil. But I think the issue still, to me, is legitimate, which is we sit here, or the panel sits here, and debates the issue of an ethics of responsibility. Does it matter that this is a concept which many abroad think is baloney?
JEAN ELSHTAIN: Well, the “many abroad” I assume probably means in Western Europe. Perhaps not. I think that the cynicism about the United States in many circles, not all, in Western Europe right now is undeniably high. Anti-Americanism has been a feature of European life for a long time. It has reached a rather virulent level. I suspect that is, in part, because post 1989, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, the “new Europe” and so on, and all of the push for a European Union, which as you know has stalled considerably — you know, you were supposed to give up nationalism, national identity, and become a European. There are many Europeans who have a hard time identifying with the euro — I mean “Is this going to hold us all together?”

I think that what has happened is anti-Americanism has become, in a way, a kind of encompassing ideology: “We don’t quite know what we are, but we know we’re not Americans.” It is very hard to penetrate through that.

I think the only thing we can continue to do — it doesn’t affect the moral issues, the fact that some Europeans don’t like us doesn’t affect the moral questions, but it does mean that we have to continue to make the arguments that we make, to do the best we can, to engage in debate and dialogue, even with those who mistrust every single thing we say and do, which is not an easy task.

I know Michael goes over there to talk. I go over there to talk. You do find that beneath the level of the sort of official elite culture stuff, there are lots of people who share these concerns, who want to talk about them and to have candid discussions with Americans, and don’t mistrust every single ethical issue that we raise, who see these as important.

MICHAEL WALZER: It is very important to stress that the ethics of responsibility, like Just War theory, is a critical doctrine. It is what enables us to say that the Bush Administration is acting irresponsibly in many parts of the world. You need a theory of responsibility if you are going to criticize irresponsibility. You can’t just throw up your hands and say “it’s all baloney,” because then we would be deprived of any means of criticism.

TRUDY RUBIN: There are many people who have asked, in different ways, whether Iraq is a worse humanitarian crisis than Darfur or than the Congo Democratic Republic, or indeed New Orleans and the mess we have made. The questions go to the issue of: (1) does the focus on Iraq take away from our moral responsibility in those issues; and (2) if we can’t handle those issues, especially New Orleans, can we handle Iraq?

GERARD POWERS: I think Congo, Darfur, and Iraq are all humanitarian disasters to one degree or another. I also think that we don’t have the capacity — the United States, at least, has limited capacity
— to do much outside of Iraq and Afghanistan right now if it requires military force. The huge expense of paying for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan is keeping us from being able to undertake our responsibilities toward other parts of the world -- in the failed states that you see in Congo and the repressive state that you see in Sudan. That is part of the moral tragedy of this affair, is we are not able to meet our moral obligations in other parts of the world.

But the international community should be the one intervening in Sudan and Congo, and it is to a certain degree, and the U.S. is and ought to support that. We should not be the unilateral interveners around the world trying to promote humanitarianism and save lives. It should be on a multilateral basis where possible.

TRUDY RUBIN: I think that several of you have touched on this. I think it’s something that troubles a lot of people. I don’t quite know how to segue it into the moral issues. The questioner asks: “What is the morality of continuing to act in Iraq as the ‘Lone Ranger,’ both in our moral decision to go in and our presumably moral decision to stay? Where do our responsibilities to the Iraqi people necessarily involve the countries in the region and the world?”

I think, to go slightly beyond this, one of the overwhelming questions that everyone has touched on is whether there is a way to internationalize this. Obviously, there are lots of factual issues concerned here.

Do you think the next president, say there is a different party in power, might be in a position to make more of a moral case for responsibility with Iraq? Or does the problem, the level that we find ourselves at, undercut the ability to try to rally the world on that basis? Maybe it could be done on a real politick basis. But on a moral basis do you see a possibility with a new administration?

SOHAIL HASHMI: I have been rather silent on one point because I belabored this point the last time I was at Fordham University, and that is the obligation of Muslims to keep their own house in order. Michael Walzer said that we in America have a lot of penance to do. Well, the Arab countries, the Arabs in general, Muslims in general, have a lot of penance to do.

The mess that was Iraq before the United States went in was a mess that required some kind of intervention by the Arabs. The Arab states have a number of brutal regimes that govern them, but Saddam Hussein’s was in a league by itself. Not only, of course, was Saddam repressing his own people, but he had already disturbed the international peace and security of the Middle East, and indeed the entire world. He had invaded Iran, which a lot of Arabs had turned a blind eye to, and then later on, of
course, they actually had supported Saddam’s efforts to fight the Iranians.

Then — if you ride on the tiger’s back, you will end up in its belly — the Kuwaitis found themselves in Saddam’s belly. Finally, at that point, they realized they had a problem.

But, still, one can find really no concerted action that they took over the long years in which Iraq was under UN sanctions, to do anything really constructive, to isolate Saddam Hussein’s regime and then to work for his overthrow. They are continuing this now.

So the responsibility, I think, primarily lies with the people who made this all possible, made American intervention, not only necessary, but so easy. That is, I think, in many ways the Arab states, the Arab leaders. I will just end with that. I could say a lot more on this point, but it makes me very heated.

TRUDY RUBIN: I think we have come to the end of the panel. Peter will be making some summary remarks.

Let me just say I find it very interesting that the idea of an ethics of responsibility has been felt strongly on the panel, and even the resistance of it is not to the idea, but to the idea that it may not be effective at this point. I think that it is something that one would wish would have a role in this political campaign, because I think it is the only way that this issue can be discussed in which you might find a way of building consensus in the political arena.

Unfortunately — that questioner put his or her finger on it — I fear we are not going to hear much of the debate revolve around that issue, which is really essential in order to formulate a way we can go forward in Iraq.

JEAN ELSHTAIN: Could I just as a panelist very quickly before Peter speaks, thank you, the audience, for your generous attention. It is really a credit to the audience. And trust me, it doesn’t always happen when this issue is being discussed. So thank you all very much.

PETER STEINFELS: Sitting in the audience, I too was struck by the quiet and attentiveness that filled this room. I was struck by the, I would say, soft tones of the panelists. And I would say that this is the panel discussion, the forum, at Fordham University, that had the least streaks of humor. I think all that reflects the seriousness and sober situation that we are now facing. I also suspect that all of you came this evening knowing that in two hours we weren’t going to entirely resolve this question.

I would like to thank so many people who wrote questions, some of which
were similar to the questions that were asked, to remarks the panelists had made, but almost all of which had their own particular nuances. So you have to bear with the reality that we couldn’t get to all of them.

We all know that, after our two hours, this is a discussion that we have to continue ourselves, carry on with family, with friends, and in our own heads. We hope and pray, despite this successful evening and panel, that we will not be having another panel of this sort two years from now.

I would like to call your attention to a number of upcoming events that the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture is sponsoring. In the back as you go out, if you haven’t seen them already, there are flyers with all these things listed.

In early November, there is going to be a discussion by the theologian John Haught, who has written extensively on the challenges that evolution poses for traditional theology, “After Darwin and Einstein: Is Belief in a Personal God Still Possible?”

In December, we are going to have a conversation with myself and one of the world’s leading scholars on the whole subject of secularization, under the heading “Secularization: The Myth and Realities,” with José Casanova.

Finally, in January we have planned another Forum, called “Religion and the Race for the Presidency: The Kennedy Moment,” going back to the famous speech that J.F.K. gave in Houston, which has become a kind of touchstone for many discussions of church/state relations, religion in presidential campaigns, and so on. We really thought it would be valuable to return to that with some very different perspectives and historical information.

Again, this material is available in the back, as is other material about the Fordham Center. We very much encourage you to leave your names for our mailing list so we can contact you by mail, or even easier by email if you have email addresses. We would appreciate it very much.

Finally, I’m sure all of you will join with me in thanking our moderator and our panelists.