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THE CANDIDATES

Choosing Which War to Fight



Tyler Hicks/The New York Times, left; Christoph Bangert for The New York Times

ONE WAR OR TWO The candidates differ on how the fight in Iraq, right, affects Afghanistan.

By HELENE COOPER Published: February 24, 2008

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TWO weeks ago, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a surprise trip to Afghanistan that was so cloaked in extra security and secrecy that reporters traveling with her weren't told where they were going until her plane had taken off from London.

Arriving in Kabul, Ms. Rice's entourage was immediately hustled across the runway to a gray C-17 military transport plane for a one-hour trip to Kandahar, where she stayed for less than three hours, never venturing off the airfield where NATO forces have their headquarters. Then it was back to Kabul for lunch with the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, in his barricaded palace. A mere eight hours after landing in Afghanistan, Ms. Rice was gone. She had spent, all told, only six hours on the ground; her plane, with its distinct blue and white United States of America logo, made a swift, steep ascent, disappearing from rocket range within

minutes.

The secrecy and security that surrounded Ms. Rice's visit highlight a central question that has now thrust its way into this year's presidential campaign: Six years after the United States invaded Afghanistan with the goal of rooting out Al Qaeda, the Taliban and the terrorist threat, Afghanistan remains a security danger zone for Americans, far more so than in 2002, the year in between the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

So, has Afghanistan now become a bigger security threat to the United States than Iraq?

The three leading contenders for the presidential nominations have staked out positions that differ radically, along party lines. All three say they believe that Afghanistan is an important security threat that needs to be addressed. But the Republican, John McCain, suggests that Iraq remains America's bugaboo of security threats, while the two Democrats, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama, appear to have moved on to Afghanistan. Both of them argue that focusing on Iraq gets in the way of a more serious threat in Afghanistan.

Senator McCain, the likely Republican nominee, makes a de facto argument that Iraq and Afghanistan are two sides of the same coin. "Senator Clinton and Senator Obama will withdraw our forces from Iraq based on an arbitrary timetable designed for the sake of political expediency and which recklessly ignores the profound human calamity and dire threats to our security that would ensue," Mr. McCain said in a Feb. 7 speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference.

Distilled to its simplest form, Mr. McCain's argument is that withdrawing from Iraq would make Americans less safe in the long run, because a withdrawal would embolden Al Qaeda, put American interests at risk in the Middle East, and make an already volatile region less safe.

Senators Obama and Clinton have tacked in the opposite direction. Iraq, they argue, makes Afghanistan more dangerous. The Iraq war, Mr. Obama told an audience of supporters in Houston last Tuesday, "distracted us from the fight that needed to be fought in Afghanistan against Al Qaeda. They're the ones who killed 3,000

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Americans.” He has said that if elected, he would deploy at least two additional brigades in Afghanistan.

Senator Clinton, who has been to Afghanistan three times, holds a similar position, her aides say, except they say that she hasn’t specified how many additional brigades she would send to Afghanistan because she wants to further explore the security situation there first. Mrs. Clinton has proposed appointing a special envoy to deal with the Afghanistan/Pakistan border.

“There is a theater of war, that I would call AfPak, with two fronts — an eastern front and a western front,” said [Richard Holbrooke](#), the former United States ambassador to the [United Nations](#) and a supporter of Mrs. Clinton’s. “I believe that we will look back ten years from now and say that AfPak was even more important to our national security than Iraq.”

For the Democrats, who have a base of support that clearly wants out of Iraq, framing the issue in terms of Afghanistan makes it a lot easier, politically, to pull out of Iraq. But leaving Iraq will be no easy thing. Experts who side with Mr. McCain argue that a quick American exit from Iraq could lead to a conflagration in the Middle East that could end up involving Saudi Arabia and Iran in a Shia-Sunni-Kurd war — a conflict that would have few winners and would likely produce an enormous number of civilian casualties.

Beyond that, the logistics of pulling out 130,000 troops from Iraq would be daunting, and it could take close to a year to get all the equipment out. Indeed, some military experts say that if the United States military was given a year to exit Iraq, it would be so consumed with the logistics that it wouldn’t be able to do anything else.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates entered the fray earlier this month, for a moment sounding almost like the (gasp!) Clinton and Obama camps by urging Europeans to draw a distinction between the wars. During remarks on his way to Munich to take the Europeans to task for not sending enough troops to support NATO in Afghanistan, Mr. Gates said part of the problem was that many Europeans were conflating Iraq with Afghanistan.

“I worry that for many Europeans the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan are confused,” Mr. Gates said. “I think they combine the two.” It was an unusually candid acknowledgment from a senior member of the Bush administration that the war in Iraq had exacted a cost, in NATO’s chances for victory in Afghanistan. Many Europeans, Mr. Gates said, “have a problem with our involvement in Iraq and project that to Afghanistan, and do not understand the very different — for them — the very different kind of threat.”

The problem is, with the United States Army stretched thin in Iraq, the Bush administration has, thus far, been left to hector its NATO allies to send additional troops to handle the growing Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. And European populations generally disapprove of their troops being sent into harm’s way in Afghanistan. No surprise, given the opposition on the streets of Europe to the American invasion of Iraq. That’s what Mr. Gates means when he says that Europeans conflate the two: Why help the United States in Afghanistan, the European logic goes, when America would be able to handle Afghanistan much more easily if its G.I.’s weren’t bogged down in Iraq?

In any case, the dynamics of the two conflicts are not the same, many foreign policy experts stress. The rapidly deteriorating situation on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border, the Musharraf government’s increased inability to confront Islamist insurgents in its border provinces, combined with the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan have turned AfPak into America’s No. 1 national security problem, these experts say, even as parts of Iraq seem to have quieted since more American troops were sent there last year. Conditions in [Pakistan](#) became even more volatile on Monday after the party of President [Pervez Musharraf](#) suffered a drubbing in parliamentary elections, leading some to question how long Mr. Musharraf will be able to cling to power and how much of his already diminished authority he can retain. And Pakistan, the experts say, is inextricably linked to Afghanistan.

“Losing Afghanistan would be far more consequential than losing Iraq,” says Bruce Hoffman, a [Georgetown University](#) professor who was an adviser on counterterrorism to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad in 2004. “If Pakistan, especially along the border, fell into complete disarray, the integrity of the Afghan country and its government will be even more threatened, and that would have far greater repercussions for us.”

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