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Who Really Lost Iraq?

Leon Panetta says the White House wanted all U.S. troops out in 2011.

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Leon Panetta was one of the Obama Administration's adults, providing good counsel as CIA director and later Secretary of Defense. President Obama could use him now. So Mr. Panetta's account in his forthcoming memoir about how the White House bungled negotiations over keeping U.S. troops in Iraq past 2011 is a bombshell that explains the real reason Americans must fight again in that country.

Mr. Obama has repeatedly claimed that he wanted to leave U.S. forces in Iraq but that Iraq's government wouldn't agree to reasonable terms. For example, on June 19 the President told CNN's Jim Acosta :

"Keep in mind, that wasn't a decision made by me. That was a decision made by the Iraqi government. We offered a modest residual force to help continue to train and advise Iraqi security forces. We had a core requirement which we require in any situation where we have U.S. troops overseas, and that is that they are provided immunity . . . The Iraqi government and Prime Minister [Nouri al-] Maliki declined to provide us that immunity."

In an excerpt from his memoir published this week on the Time magazine website, Mr. Panetta tells a different story. He relates the private conversations he had with Obama in Iraq, which he claimed that the President told him to "keep U.S. troops in Iraq as long as it took to fight against Islamic violence." He was willing to go so far as to publicly endorse the Minister of Defense al-Maliki's demand that any U.S. forces America would give leave to be sent to the front lines would have to be submitted to Iraqi parliament for approval.

That made negotiations harder, but as Mr. Panetta relates, "we had leverage, such as withdrawing reconstruction aid. The White House refused to use it." My fear, as I voiced to the President and others, was that if the country split apart or slid back into the violence that we'd seen in the years immediately following the U.S. invasion, it could become a new haven for terrorists to plot attacks against the U.S. Iraq's stability was not only in Iraq's interest but also in ours. I privately and publicly advocated for a



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residual force that could provide training and security for Iraq's military."

Mr. Panetta says he and his deputies pressed this argument, "but the President's team at the White House pushed back, and the differences occasionally became heated. . . . [T]hose on our side viewed the White House as so eager to rid itself of Iraq that it was willing to withdraw rather than lock in arrangements that would preserve our influence and interests.

"We debated with al-Maliki even as we debated among ourselves, with time running out. . . . To my frustration, the White House coordinated the negotiations but never really led them" and "without the President's active advocacy, al-Maliki was allowed to slip away."

Mr. Panetta adds that, "To this day, I believe that a small U.S. troop presence in Iraq could have effectively advised the Iraqi military on how to deal with al-Qaeda's resurgence and the sectarian violence that has engulfed the country."

All of this comports with our own reporting from 2011, but it is nonetheless distressing to have confirmed how much Mr. Obama and his munchkin Metternichs in the White House put their political desire to withdraw from Iraq above the U.S. national interest.

Here's the article gentle pupils:

<http://online.wsj.com/articles/who-really-lost-iraq-1412292534>

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