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EDITORIAL

Unfinished Debate on Iraq

Iraq will be a central challenge — perhaps the central challenge — for whoever succeeds President Bush and has to repair the profound damage he has wrought with a war that should never have been fought and has been managed so ineptly. The candidates must talk more to the American people about when troops will be withdrawn and how it will be done, as well as how they will manage relations with Iraq and the region.

Yet the war has receded as a major topic on the campaign trail, much to the relief of the Republican candidates, who never stray far from the party line but know that Americans overwhelmingly want the troops home.

One year after Mr. Bush announced that he would try to salvage his misadventure by rushing in 30,000 more troops, casualties are down. Yet 2007 was the most violent year in Iraq since the 2003 invasion. Mr. Bush has nothing to show in the way of political progress, which is even more important for ending the war.

As a result, the war continues to be a significant political disadvantage for Republicans, not to mention a constant drain in lives lost and resources squandered. Meanwhile, violence in Afghanistan has surged and Al Qaeda has strengthened along the Afghan-Pakistan border. That is the real front line of the war on terror — no matter how often the Republicans say it is in Iraq.

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Except for Representative Ron Paul — who wants all troops withdrawn immediately but is hardly going to be the nominee — the Republican candidates are slavishly wedded to Mr. Bush's policy of war without end. All oppose a pullout timetable. Even Mike Huckabee, the former Arkansas governor who accused Mr. Bush of pursuing a foreign policy with an "arrogant bunker mentality," has promised not to withdraw troops any faster than recommended by Gen. David Petraeus, the military commander in Iraq who created the current "surge" strategy and has been cautious about force reductions.

Senator John McCain conducted a long and lonely crusade to persuade Mr. Bush to beef up forces in Iraq, and sees the downturn in violence as vindication. From the start, if the United States was ever going to be successful in Iraq, it needed far more troops than Mr. Bush sent in 2003. We are encouraged that many of the candidates promise to avoid repeating such a huge mistake.

Even Mr. McCain acknowledges uncertainty about whether the security gains produced by the troop surge can be sustained. He said months ago he had no Plan B if the escalation failed, and there is no sign he has one now. Mr. Bush's troop buildup was sold as a way to buy Iraqi politicians breathing room to finally address the tensions driving sectarian violence, including an equitable division of oil wealth and strategies to bring more Baathists and Sunnis into the Shiite-led government. Those goals have not been met, and the administration has virtually abandoned them.

It remains unclear what the Republicans will consider sufficient success to warrant bringing the troops home. Beyond tough-sounding talk about refusing to surrender, no Republican has ever defined victory in Iraq or given the slightest idea of how to achieve it.

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The Democratic candidates all want to cut American losses in Iraq and end the war, although the issue is no longer as defining for their campaigns as it once was, because casualties are down, the administration has made a minimal, grudging effort to reduce force levels, and the economy is teetering on a recession. Their message has been compromised by the repeated failure of their party, despite a majority in Congress, to pass legislation demanding that Mr. Bush alter his Iraq policy.

The Democratic candidates have spent a fair amount of time debating how much support each gave to the war at the outset. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and former Senator John Edwards, like most other members of Congress, voted for the war resolution. Mr. Edwards has forcefully repudiated his vote, while Mrs. Clinton has offered unsatisfying explanations for hers. Senator Barack Obama, who was not in office at the time, rhetorically opposed the invasion. He deserves credit for that, but the focus now must be on ending the war.

Mr. Edwards has staked out a position that would produce a speedier and more complete withdrawal — within 10 months after taking office — than his two rivals. That would include American troops who are training the Iraqi Army and police, leaving only about 5,000 to protect the American Embassy and relief workers.

Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama are more realistic. They would start withdrawing troops quickly but have left open precisely how long it would take. Mr. Obama said he would give the Pentagon 16 months to withdraw, but would adjust his timetable based on conditions in Iraq. Mrs. Clinton has not assigned a specific schedule. Both candidates are willing to keep American trainers and counterterrorism units in Iraq as combat troops are brought home and have argued that any withdrawal must be done responsibly, a sentiment we firmly share.

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Many important issues have not been fully examined. What is to become of the thousands of Iraqis who helped America and its coalition partners as translators, drivers and fixers and will face retribution? What will be the nature and content of a long-term agreement on future Iraqi-American relations? Will Congress have a say in it? Will the United States retain bases in Iraq or elsewhere in the region? How will a new president seek to enlist key regional countries in stabilizing Iraq? How will a new president improve on Mr. Bush's failure to facilitate political conciliation? Should the United Nations be involved, as Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama suggest?

The Iraq war has laid bare the serious inability of American civilian agencies to quickly and coherently meet the country's postconflict needs, from reviving energy infrastructure to organizing federal and local governments. In *Foreign Affairs* magazine, Mitt Romney, the former Massachusetts governor and Republican, proposed integrated regional commands for civilian agencies. That's an idea deserving consideration.

Another crucial question is the issue of pre-emptive war — or in the case of Iraq, preventive war. The United States must be prepared to use military force to pre-empt another attack on American soil. In Iraq, Mr. Bush went much further, invading a country that he imagined might someday pose a threat to the United States — not

pre-empting an imminent threat but preventing the possibility of a threat. To justify his actions, he persuaded Americans that Saddam Hussein had chemical, biological and, especially, nuclear weapons programs — a claim that proved to be specious.

No serious candidate in 2008 can renounce the potential use of force to defend national security or in retaliation for an attack on the United States. But no voter should cast a ballot for a candidate who will not forswear such wars of choice. We hope American voters have learned the lesson of 2000, when Mr. Bush escaped serious questioning on foreign affairs during the campaign. He then turned sensible policies on their head and bumbled his way into a disastrous war.

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