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Conservative Hawks Are Incoherent Regarding Iraq Troop Withdrawal

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Prominent conservatives continue to sputter about President Obama's announcement that all U.S. troops will be withdrawn from Iraq by year's end. GOP presidential candidate Rick Perry [charges](#)^[3] that the president was "irresponsible" for making that announcement, thereby "letting the enemy know" the date when U.S. forces would leave Iraq. Council on Foreign Relations writer [Max Boot](#)^[4] [makes a similar argument](#)^[5], as do several [other](#)^[6] [neoconservative](#)^[7] [pundits](#)^[8].

But as I've pointed out [elsewhere](#)^[9], Obama did not set the December 31, 2011 deadline. George W. Bush did in an agreement with the Iraqi government that he signed in late 2008. One then has to ask whether Perry and other critics of Obama believe that Bush was being "irresponsible." And if so, it is curious that virtually none of them have made that argument—or even hinted at such a conclusion.

That apparent double standard begs some other questions. The principal reason why Obama's effort to modify the Bush agreement so that a residual U.S. force could remain after 2011 failed was that the administration refused to accept the Iraqi government's demand that American troops be subject to Iraqi law. Are conservatives arguing that he should have made that concession? If so, their position is totally inconsistent with the position they have taken with respect to other countries that host U.S. troops. Indeed, fears that American military personnel might be subject to prosecution under foreign laws and in foreign jurisdictions have been a major reason for the [intense](#)^[10] [opposition](#)^[11] to U.S. involvement in the International Criminal Court.

Conversely, if Obama's critics believe that U.S. troops should not be exposed to possible prosecution in a judicial system that has few of the due process protections that are considered the norm in the United States, how do they suggest that the administration get the Iraqi government to change its stance? Most of their criticisms on that front consist of little more than inane generalities that Obama should have shown greater leadership or engaged in more effective diplomatic bargaining. But how, *precisely*, should he have done that? Washington was

not exactly in a position to order Baghdad to accept U.S. demands on the jurisdictional issue. And Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki knew that he would be risking political suicide if he capitulated to U.S. pressure and accepted a policy that is wildly unpopular with the Iraqi people.

Are conservatives implying that the Obama administration should have overridden Iraqi objectives and just imposed our will? Ethical issues aside, that would certainly require far more than the limited number of troops the U.S. has in Iraq at the moment, and it would likely re-ignite a widespread insurgency directed against a continuing U.S. military occupation.

The utterly inconsistent and incoherent position that most conservatives have taken on the troop withdrawal issue underscores the bankruptcy of the overall Iraq policy that they've pushed since early 2003. They're frustrated that the Iraq mission has not gone as planned, and they fear—quite correctly—that once U.S. forces have departed, the waste and futility of that mission will become glaringly obvious to all except a shrinking contingent of true believers. What we're seeing now is a mixture of partisan politics and a temper tantrum in response to that disagreeable reality.

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