

U.S. Military Fatalities in Iraq: Year 3

by Glenn Kutler

Glenn Kutler (gkutler@gis.net) is principal of Fulcrum Capital, LLC, based in Philadelphia. Prior to establishing Fulcrum in 1997, he worked in information technology operations, merchant banking, corporate development, and venture capital.

***Abstract:** With year four of the Iraq War under way, this article focuses on the sources, patterns, and effects of fatalities. It shows how trends in fatalities correlate with nine distinct phases since the war's inception and analyzes in detail the last two, which prevailed during year 3, ending March 19, 2006: the Iraqi election cycle (which encompassed the election of the National Assembly, establishment of the transnational government, drafting of the Constitution, approval of the Constitution, and the election of parliament) and the start of U.S. efforts to disengage from the conflict. U.S. intentions to scale down its involvement while increasing Iraqi self-sufficiency have been hampered by the persistence of fatalities inflicted by the insurgency, which bifurcated its efforts during year 3, matching hostilities toward U.S. troops with organized civil strife involving Iraqis. Ultimately, only the Iraqi people and their new government can defeat the insurgency and bring U.S. involvement in the war to an end.*

As the war in Iraq entered its fourth year on March 19, 2006, the U.S. military had suffered over 19,000 casualties: more than 17,000 wounded and 2,300 dead. Ninety-five percent of the casualties occurred in the midst of an insurgency that has operated since the fall of Baghdad in April 2003. During the first year of the war, the insurgency showed signs of consistency and ferocity, with an especially deadly cycle of violence that started around September 11, 2003—the second anniversary of the 9/11 attacks—but generally operated at a low level. As of the war's first anniversary, on March 19, 2004, total U.S. military casualties numbered 3,573, with 2,988 wounded and 585 dead.

The second year of the war began with the killing of four U.S. contractors whose bodies were mutilated and hung from a bridge in Fallujah. This signaled a dramatic increase in the lethality of the insurgency, which led to a major escalation of the U.S. war effort. As measured by casualty figures, the war was 2.5 times more costly in the second year than the first, with 8,454 wounded and 936 dead (9,390 total), resulting in

cumulative counts of 11,442 wounded and 1,521 dead (12,963 total) as of March 19, 2005.¹

In the third year, the escalation in the U.S. war effort slowed, but a new bifurcation of the insurgency developed, in the form of calculated civil strife involving Iraqis. Early in the war, civilian casualties occurred as inevitable, collateral damage. During the occupation, which began after Baghdad fell, attacks on civilians were common but opportunistic in nature, seizing on lapses in the domestic security apparatus in Iraq. As the second year progressed, the insurgency focused its organized efforts on escalating hostilities targeting U.S. troops. However as the Iraqi election cycle began in January 2005, Iraqis were regularly and systematically targeted by insurgents. In the third year of the war alone, approximately 10,000² Iraqi police, soldiers, and civilians were killed. The insurgency inflicted considerable damage on U.S. forces, but total casualties were down by 29 percent from the second year (see Table 1).

The Bush administration acknowledged the political ramifications of increasing numbers of casualties in June 2005 when it hired Peter Feaver, a political science professor at Duke University who has analyzed public opinion regarding the war. As reported in the *New York Times*, “Dr. Feaver was recruited after he and Duke colleagues presented the administration with an analysis of polls about the Iraq War in 2003 and 2004. They concluded that Americans would support a war with mounting casualties on one condition: that they believed it would ultimately succeed.” Based on this research, Feaver served as an architect of the administration’s “Plan for Victory,” which the president presented at a speech at the U.S. Naval Academy on November 30, 2005.³

The political consequences of the war will likely be measured by the results of the November 2006 congressional elections. This article presents a retrospective of U.S. casualties and surrounding events for the third year of the war, with a special emphasis on civil strife involving Iraqis. Specifically, I focus

¹ Years 1–2 were chronicled in my article, “U.S. Military Fatalities in Iraq: A Two-Year Retrospective,” *Orbis*, Summer 2005, which, first, showed that the insurgency inflicted increasingly high levels of fatalities among U.S. troops, achieving a level of resilience and vitality that is difficult to quash; and second, explored the political ramifications of the war, inferring from a comparison of fatality statistics with the results of the November 2004 presidential election, that mounting fatalities would likely have damaging consequences for the Bush administration. Except as noted elsewhere, all casualty figures are extracted from iCasualties.org (www.icasualties.org), to which I am a contributor. iCasualties presents a comprehensive chronicle of the Iraq War, including extensive links to news sources and other documentation.

² Iraqi civilian fatality figures for the first and second years are derived from Iraq Body Count (www.iraqbodycount.net). Iraqi civilian and military fatalities for the third year come from iCasualties.org.

³ Scott Shane, “White House Seeks a Strategy for Victory, at Home and in Iraq,” *New York Times*, Dec. 4, 2005; Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler, “Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq,” June 10, 2005, available at www.duke.edu/~gelpi/. The “Plan for Victory” document, “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,” Feb. 2003, is posted at www.whitehouse.gov.

Table 1. U.S. Casualties in Iraq War (Number and % Increase over Previous Year)

	Year 1 (ending 3/19/04)	Year 2 (ending 3/19/05)		Year 3 (ending 3/19/06)	
<i>Annual Totals</i>					
Dead	585	936	60%	797	-15%
Wounded	2,988	8,454	183	5,827	-31
Total	3,573	9,390	163	6,624	-29
<i>Cumulative Totals</i>					
Dead		1,521	160%	2,318	52%
Wounded		11,442	283	17,269	51
Total		12,963	263	19,587	51

on the phenomenon of bifurcation in the insurgency that is evident in a detailed analysis of data concerning fatalities during year three.

Fatality Retrospective

The insurgency has engaged in a sustained conflict with U.S. forces that shows no sign of abating after three years of war, but instead has settled into a persistent ebb and flow. The evident pulsations in the insurgency coincide with nine distinct phases of the war.

1. *Invasion*: Mar. 19, 2003 until the fall of Baghdad, Apr. 9, 2003.
2. *Initial Occupation*: Apr. 10, 2003 through the second anniversary of 9/11 (2003).
3. *Insurgency Unleashed*: Sept. 12, 2003 through Nov. 20, 2003.
4. *Counteroffensive*: Nov. 21, 2003 through Mar. 6, 2004.
5. *Anniversary Insurgency*: Mar. 7, 2004 through the transfer of sovereignty, June 28, 2004.
6. *Resistance to Sovereignty and U.S. Election*: June 29, 2004 through Nov. 2, 2004.
7. *Fallujab Offensive (and Iraqi Election)*: Nov. 3, 2004 through the Iraqi National Assembly election, Jan. 30, 2005.
8. *Iraqi Elections*: Jan. 31, 2005 through the parliamentary election on Dec. 15, 2005.⁴ This phase can be further subdivided as follows:
 - a. *National Assembly Elected*: Jan. 31, 2005 until its first meeting, Mar. 17, 2006.
 - b. *Transitional Government Established*: Mar. 18, 2006 until May 11, 2005.

⁴In my earlier article, this phase was termed "Post-Iraqi Election" and ended on the second anniversary of the war, March 19, 2005. This phase in fact continued beyond the second anniversary for nearly all of 2005, concluding with the Iraqi parliamentary election on December 15. At that point, a new phase began with the U.S. seeking ways to extract itself from the conflict.

- c. *Constitution Drafted*: May 12, 2005 until Aug. 28, 2005.
 - d. *Constitution Approved*: Aug. 29, 2005 until Oct. 15, 2005.
 - e. *Council of Representatives Elected*: Oct. 16, 2005 until Dec. 15, 2005.
9. *U.S. Disengagement*: Dec. 16, 2005 through the third anniversary of the war, Mar. 19, 2006.

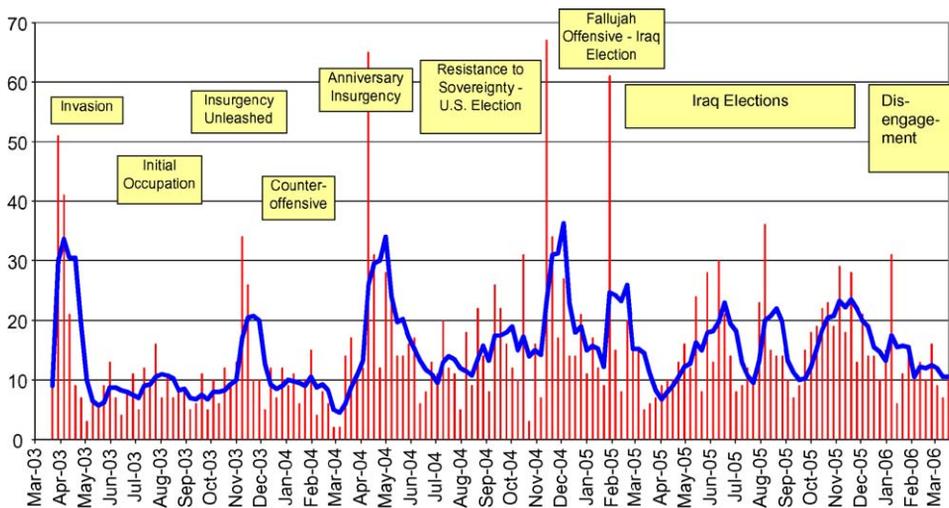
Figure 1 displays U.S. military fatalities per week for the first three years of the war, with a four-week moving-average trend line. This type of trend calculation highlights the underlying rhythm in a series of data by smoothing extreme highs and lows, and reveals the phases of the war, as outlined above, which are identified by the peaks and valleys in the trend line.

Phase 8 – Iraqi Elections (January 31, 2005–December 16, 2005)

The trajectory of events for most of the third year of war was determined by the election cycle, which was both the United States’ greatest opportunity and the insurgency’s greatest threat. The very political stability sought by the United States, a prerequisite for any reduction of troop strength, was a mortal danger to the insurgency, which could be weakened as disaffected Iraqis were drawn into the political system. As a result, U.S. officials and the military worked feverishly to keep the election cycle on track, while the insurgency did everything in its power to derail it.

The elections were governed by the Transitional Administrative Law for Iraq (TAL) adopted in March 2004 by the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqi Governing Council. The TAL served as a temporary constitution for

Figure 1. U.S. Soldiers Killed in Iraq Three Years Ending March 19, 2006 (Total Fatalities Weekly with Four-Week Moving Average Trend Line)



the Iraqi interim government once sovereignty was transferred to it in June 2004.⁵ The TAL envisioned a two-part transitional period. The first extended from the transfer of sovereignty until election of a National Assembly on January 30, 2005, and formation thereafter of an Iraqi transitional government; the second involved the writing and ratification of a permanent constitution by August 15, 2005, election of a new legislature by December 15, 2005, and formation of a new government shortly thereafter. As of March 19, 2006, a new government had not been formed (the new parliament had met only once amid a dispute about appointing a new prime minister) and the TAL remained in effect.

National Assembly Elected. Once the January 2005 election had occurred, Shiites, Kurds, and Sunnis began jockeying for position and power in the new government. A two-thirds majority vote was required for the Assembly to elect a president, prime minister, and other officials. Shiites, with just over half the Assembly seats, were forced to negotiate with the Kurds, who demanded special considerations for joining a government. Sunnis, who largely boycotted the election, threatened to continue making the government's work difficult unless they were brought into the process.

Indeed, before the government took power, the Sunni-dominated insurgency unleashed a torrent of attacks on Iraqi civilians. Daily attacks were reported in February 2005, including the killing of 40 pilgrims on the Ashura holiday, and a suicide car bombing in Hilla that killed 120. Even as the National Assembly finally convened on March 17, 2005, the Green Zone was attacked by a mortar barrage. While this civil violence was progressing, U.S. military fatalities were decreasing. From a peak of 61 dead the week before the January 30 election, fatalities dropped dramatically, reaching six the week before the second anniversary of the war, the lowest weekly total of the entire election phase.

Iraqi Transitional Government Established. With the seating of the National Assembly, the raw politics of forming a government quickly brought the process into disarray. The Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani urged compromise, while members of the Assembly warned about obstacles that could delay creation of a constitution and subsequent elections by six months.⁶ Many Iraqis blamed the TAL, complaining that the two-thirds vote requirement to form a government was too stringent and that the lack of a deadline relieved any pressure to make deals. In early April, however, Kurds and Shiites made a breakthrough. Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, was named president and Ibrahim al-Jafaari, a Shiite, prime minister.

By then, the insurgency had again intensified, and U.S. military fatalities began to increase steadily and substantially. From a low of six the week

⁵ The TAL Document is available at www.cpa-iraq.org/government/TAL.html. See also Nathan J. Brown, "Transitional Administrative Law Commentary and Analysis," Mar. 7–8, 2004 (updated Dec. 30, 2005), at <http://www.geocities.com/nathanbrown1/interimiraqiconstitution.html>.

⁶ Edward Wong, "Delay Possible On Iraq Charter As Talks Falter," *New York Times*, Mar. 30, 2005.

before the second anniversary, fatalities rose to 16 during the week including April 29, when a cabinet was finally approved. By the week of May 11, as a committee of 55 Assembly members was appointed to write a constitution, fatalities rose to 24 for the week.

Insurgents also directed attacks against Iraqis during this period. As if to signal an increase in hostilities toward civilians, the insurgents killed American activist Marla Ruzicka, who worked to aid Iraqis, in an April 18 car bombing. A week later, 21 deaths and many more wounded were reported as the insurgents unveiled a new technique, the use of twin bombings, to kill police and rescuers with a second bomb who were coming to help victims of a first. In a three-day period at the start of May (coinciding with reports in *Newsweek*, later proven false, about a Quran's being flushed down a toilet by U.S. soldiers at the Guantánamo detention center, and with publication of the pre-war "Downing Street" memo), more than 100 Iraqis were killed and nearly double that number wounded in a blatant effort to intimidate the new government.⁷

This vigorous insurgent offensive marked the first coordinated attacks on both civilian and military targets and prompted an unprecedented response from the United States, involving counterattacks of both a military and a political nature. U.S. troops launched the first in a series of offensives in the Tal Afar region of remote western Iraq, a haven for insurgents. And acting in a new political dimension, both Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Dick Cheney made personal appeals through meetings and phone calls to Iraqi politicians to complete formation of a government.⁸ This type of multi-pronged response—military and political—became commonplace as the process of drafting a new constitution continued.

Constitution Drafted. With an increasingly violent insurgency targeting both civilians and the military, the United States exerted strong political pressure as the Iraqis struggled to draft a constitution. Just five days after the May 11, 2005 appointment of the 55-member committee, Secretary Rice visited Baghdad to push the Shiites and Kurds to reach out to Sunnis and include them in the drafting process. While Sunnis were under-represented in the National Assembly because of their boycott of the January 2005 voting, a proposal emerged to add 46 members to the committee, for a total of 101 members, 15–20 of which were to be Sunnis, roughly in proportion to their 20 percent share of Iraq's population.

As negotiations began with Sunni politicians to constitute the new, larger constitutional committee, the insurgents exerted pressure in favor of their political compatriots. It was in the face of this pressure that Vice President

⁷ Richard A. Oppel, Jr. "35 Iraqis Killed as Leaders Seek to Fill New Cabinet," *New York Times*, May 2, 2005.

⁸ Richard A. Oppel, Jr. "The Conflict in Iraq: Politics; Rice and Cheney Are Said To Push Iraq on Impasse," *New York Times*, Apr. 25, 2005.

Cheney commented, “I think they’re in the last throes, if you will, of the insurgency.” U.S. military fatalities continued to increase from 24 during the week the constitutional committee was first formed on May 11 to 28 the week ending May 22 and 30 the week ending June 11. And like clockwork the following week, as negotiations incorporating the Sunni politicians into the process were completed, U.S. fatalities began to trail off, to a low of 8 the week of June 26. Fatalities remained low for three more weeks, averaging ten per week as Sunnis were reported to be looking ahead optimistically to the constitutional referendum in October.⁹ Despite the relative calm, however, military strategists noted a new lethality among attacks by insurgents, an ominous portent of events to come, as the use of shaped charges effectively penetrated armored vehicles.¹⁰

In late July and early August, an impasse arose in the constitutional drafting process and U.S. military fatalities climbed, reaching the highest levels of the third year. Thorny issues surfaced, such as regional autonomy, women’s rights, revenue control, electoral law, and the role of religion in the law.¹¹ Civil strife ensued and political fissures widened. On July 13, ten Sunnis in police custody were found dead, suffocated. A week later two Sunnis involved in the constitutional process were assassinated. Sunni anger grew and a boycott of the constitutional process was threatened, just weeks before the August 15 deadline to complete a draft. Insurgents reacted by killing eight U.S. soldiers in two separate IED attacks in Baghdad on July 24; a total of 23 soldiers were killed that week. The next week, ending August 6, the number of fatalities increased to 36, including 18 on August 2, the worst day of the third year that far (14 of them were Ohio marines killed by an IED in Haditha).

While U.S. fatalities fluctuated during the constitutional drafting process, attacks on civilians remained at a high level throughout. In June, 700 civilians were reported killed in Baghdad alone.¹² July saw a series of brazen kidnappings and murders involving Pakistani, Bahraini, and Algerian diplomats; there were also numerous conventional attacks, the most violent of which involved the explosion of a fuel tanker on July 18 in Mussayib, south of Baghdad, in which nearly 100 were killed and many more wounded.

Chaos on both the military and political fronts prompted an urgent response from the Bush administration to keep the constitutional process on track. In rapid succession at the end of July, both Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld spoke forcefully about

⁹James Glanz, “Sunni Group Urges Members in Iraq to Vote in the Elections,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2005.

¹⁰David S. Cloud, “Iraqi Insurgents Refining Bombs; G.I. Deaths Rise,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2005.

¹¹Kirk Semple, “Thorny Issues Remain on Draft Of New Constitution for Iraq,” *New York Times*, July 23, 2005 and Edward Wong, “U.S. and Iraqis Start Offensive Where Marines Were Killed,” *New York Times*, Aug. 6, 2005.

¹²“Week in Iraq June 19–25,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2005.

completing the constitutional process. The ambassador emphasized the importance of avoiding civil war, while the secretary introduced new terminology for “the global war on terror,” referring to “a global struggle against violent extremism” to highlight the importance of political solutions to the problems in Iraq. On August 6, right after the Haditha attack, a new offensive was launched by U.S. troops in Anbar province.

But with the August 15 deadline pending, the constitutional process stalled and the insurgency was unrelenting. The constitutional committee requested, and the National Assembly passed, a one-week extension and delivered a draft constitution on August 23 to the National Assembly for a vote. Issues remained, however, especially over the role of religion under the new constitution. President Bush became personally involved, calling Abdul Aziz Hakim of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq to request that he consider a compromise to keep the constitutional process from falling apart. Against a backdrop of continuing violence—including a bombing at a bus terminal on August 18 that killed 43 people and battles among rival Shiite groups in Baghdad, Basra, and Najaf—and with Sunnis throughout Iraq protesting, a disputed draft of the constitution was presented to the National Assembly for a vote on August 28.¹³

The constitutional drafting process survived tremendous pressures politically, in the form of sectarian disputes among blocs of Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish politicians, as the United States responded aggressively, with active participation by senior-level officials including the president. The drafting process also survived tremendous pressures militarily, in the form of relentless insurgent attacks as the U.S. military responded with aggressive incursions in the Sunni triangle.

From a high of 36 U.S. military deaths the week ending August 6, U.S. military fatalities declined sharply, averaging 13 per week for the four weeks ending September 3 and reaching a low of seven the week ending September 10.

As it happened, the escalation of violence in Iraq that peaked in early August was paralleled by an increase in U.S. fatalities in Afghanistan. It is difficult to determine if events in one theater of operation are linked with or otherwise directly affect events in the other.¹⁴ However, it is significant that the

¹³The extraordinary involvement of the president in the stormy final negotiations to complete the draft constitution coincided with the approach of Hurricane Katrina, which made its first landfall in Florida on August 25, the same day as his call to Hakim, and struck New Orleans four days later.

¹⁴Iran may or may not be supporting and even coordinating insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq. ABC News reported on March 6, 2006 that powerful bombs manufactured in Iran are being shipped clandestinely to Iraq to be used in attacks by insurgents against American armor and President Bush made similar assertions in a speech March 13. It is possible that Iran is also making such munitions available to Afghanistan, where a recent surge in IED attacks has been reported.

months of April, June, and August, months of increasing U.S. fatalities as the Iraqi transitional government was established and the constitution drafted, were also the months with the highest U.S. fatality totals of the entire war in Afghanistan, with 18, 26, and 15, respectively. As a result of these surges, 2005 was the deadliest year of that war to date for U.S. soldiers, with 94 fatalities, double the number in 2004. Combined casualty figures for Iraq and Afghanistan (and including an estimated 60 killed and 100 wounded in other locations as part of Operation Enduring Freedom) exceed 20,000 as of March 19, 2006, with 17,974 wounded and 2,596 dead.

Constitution Approved. Once the constitution was drafted, attention shifted immediately to the October 15 referendum to approve it. In Washington, after heavy personal involvement at the highest levels during the drafting of the constitution, the Bush administration disavowed any active role in the process of obtaining approval. According to National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, “We will continue to be a voice and a facilitator of greater understanding between the three communities. But it is their document and they will have to take the lead on this point.”¹⁵

In Iraq, an atmosphere of terror prevailed, typified by the stampede and death of nearly 1,000 Shiite pilgrims crossing a bridge in Baghdad on August 31, thought to have been caused by rumors of a suicide bomber. On September 7, in the worst attacks in Basra in more than a year, a pair of bomb attacks killed 20 people, including four American contractors. Responding to a U.S. offensive in Tal Afar, insurgents launched a series of attacks in Baghdad on September 13–14, killing two hundred people. On September 27, five Shiite teachers were rounded up and murdered in their school, and on September 30, three truck bombs exploded simultaneously in Balad, killing 62 people.

The constitutional approval process was embroiled in overt sectarian conflict as Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, at the end of September, urged Shiites to vote in favor of the constitution, while, less than two weeks later, Sunni clerics were urging a “no” vote. The imminent trial of Saddam Hussein, scheduled to begin on October 19, just after the vote, inflamed sectarian animosity.

Once again, the insurgency increased hostilities. The rate of U.S. military fatalities doubled for the weeks through October 15, 2005, rising from the low of seven for the week ending September 10 to 22 during the week of the referendum. At the eleventh hour, Iraqi politicians compromised in an effort to appease the Sunnis, offering them participation in a process to amend the constitution after formation of a new government, then planned for the end of December 2005. This move was insufficient to generate support from Sunnis, who largely voted against the constitution. But large numbers of Sunnis voted nonetheless. As a result, three provinces rejected the constitution, two by more than a two-thirds majority. However, a third province was

¹⁵Richard W. Stevenson, “U.S. Seeks to Aid Iraqi Charter, at a Distance,” *New York Times*, Aug. 31, 2005.

required to reject the constitution by a two-thirds majority for it to fail. The third province in this case only defeated it by a simple majority, so the constitution passed.

Parliament (Council of Representatives) Election. With the constitution ratified but Sunnis in opposition, the insurgency continued to pound U.S. forces. On October 23, 2005, the two thousandth U.S. military fatality was recorded. The number of soldiers killed each week continued to rise from the 22 killed during the week of the referendum, reaching a peak of 28 during the week ending November 19. On November 6, almost a year to the day since the Fallujah offensive set the stage for the January 2005 National Assembly election, U.S. troops launched a major attack against insurgents near the Syrian border to help stabilize the country in advance of the December 15 parliamentary election.

Against this backdrop, Iraqi insurgents attacked three hotels in Jordan on November 9, killing nearly 60 people. Ten days later, an attack on a mosque in the Kurdish town of Khanaqin killed 70 civilians. Then, as the election approached, the insurgents appeared to declare a unilateral truce. Attacks on civilians declined and the truce seemed to facilitate high turnout, including Sunnis, and a relative calm on election day, which proceeded without incident.¹⁶ U.S. military fatalities declined during the truce period, as well. Despite the killing of ten marines by an IED in Fallujah on December 1, the fatality rate reached a low of ten per week during the week after the parliamentary election on December 15.

After a Herculean effort during the entire Iraqi election phase, from January 31, 2005 through December 15, 2005, the U.S. achieved every one of the political objectives it had laid out, from the first national assembly election in January through the presentation of the constitution in August to the referendum in October and the parliamentary vote in December. The cost in U.S. military fatalities during this phase was 721 soldiers killed and 5,416 wounded, for a total of 6,137 U.S. casualties.

Emboldened by political progress in Iraq, President Bush said in a speech at Fort Bragg North Carolina on June 28, 2005, “Amid all this violence, I know Americans ask the question: Is the sacrifice worth it? It is worth it.” In the same speech, he also introduced a new mantra for the Iraq War: “Our strategy can be summed up this way: As the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down.”

Organized Civil Strife – The Bifurcation of the Insurgency

For the Iraqis, “standing up while we stand down” means that they need both to defend themselves militarily and govern themselves politically. But the actions of the insurgents during the third year of the war, in the form of

¹⁶ Kirk Semple, “High Sunni Turnout Suggests A Deal for an Election Day Truce,” *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2005.

organized civil strife during the election cycle and thereafter, pose a severe challenge to the military and political well-being of Iraq.

At the start of the U.S. counteroffensive in November 2003, CPA administrator Paul Bremer noted the commencement of civil strife in Iraq, saying, “Far fewer Americans have been killed in guerrilla attacks in recent days. . . . Instead the insurgents have turned to killing other Iraqis.”¹⁷ Before this, there had been a generalized sense that civilians were living in a security vacuum that some were taking advantage of, as exemplified by the looting of government institutions immediately after the invasion. Such actions were perceived as lawlessness and did not rise to the level of organized insurgency. When Bremer observed the start of civil strife, he noted that it was again opportunistic, in the sense that it was in counterpoint, or complementary, to insurgent activity directed at U.S. troops. Indeed, with the decline in U.S. fatalities at the end of 2003, leading up to the war’s first anniversary, there was an air of hopefulness that the insurgency might be suppressed and resources diverted to improve civilian security. During year one, 12,000 Iraqi civilians were killed, 4,000 during the invasion and 8,000 thereafter.

However, the anniversary insurgency, beginning in March 2004, erased this possibility. With hostilities toward Americans escalating, civilian security took lower priority and civil strife became commonplace, spurred by the atmosphere of lawlessness that had permeated Iraq since the start of the occupation. Throughout the second year, civil hostilities maintained an air of opportunism and occurred largely in the shadows of the organized insurgency being fought against the United States. Indeed, the most notable attacks occurred when U.S. fatalities were on the decline. Even so, there were over 10,000 Iraqi civilian fatalities during that second year.

Three years into the war, with the bombing of the golden dome of the Askariya mosque in Samarra on February 22, 2006, questions of whether Iraq is on the brink of civil war have been commonplace. In testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee on March 9, 2006, Gen. John P. Abizaid, echoing Bremer’s 2003 comments on civil strife, reported that “sectarian violence is a greater concern for us security-wise right now than the insurgency.”¹⁸

But in fact, civil strife has been endemic to Iraq since the start of the war. At the beginning of the third year, however—in fact, even before then, at the start of the Iraqi election phase in January 2005—the character of the civil conflict did indeed change, from opportunistic to organized. At that time the war bifurcated into two full-scale conflicts: one involving insurgents versus Americans, the other involving Iraqis themselves. During the 10-1/2 month

¹⁷ Joel Brinkley, “Iraqi Attacks on Americans Start to Ease, Bremer Says,” *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 2003.

¹⁸ Ann Scott Tyson, “U.S. Sets Plans To Aid Iraq in Civil War” *Washington Post*, Mar. 10, 2006.

Iraqi Elections phase, there were at least 6,500 civilian fatalities and 2,300 Iraqi military and police fatalities, for a total of 8,800, more than 12 times the number of U.S. fatalities during the same period.

The success of U.S. efforts to disengage from Iraq now that the Iraqi election cycle is complete hinges on the ability of the Iraqi government, supported by U.S. troops, to quell this civil strife. Secretary Rumsfeld, also before the Senate Appropriations committee remarked, “The plan is to prevent a civil war and to the extent one were to occur, to have the . . . Iraqi security forces deal with it to the extent they’re able to.”

Phase 9 – U.S. Disengagement (December 15, 2005–March 19, 2006)

U.S. disengagement will take many months if not years, and this survey covers only three months of disengagement activity leading up to the third anniversary of the war on March 19, 2006. But on the ground in Iraq, there is a growing recognition that the insurgency cannot be defeated except by Iraqis. “The Americans can’t occupy this country,” said a marine captain based in Anbar province. “The Iraqi government is going to have to beat this insurgency.”¹⁹ Indeed, Iraqis already are, to a large extent, “standing up as we stand down.” Throughout the war, the number of Iraqi fatalities has dwarfed the number of U.S. soldiers killed. During the organized civil strife of the past year, more than 12 times as many Iraqis died (civilian, police and military) as Americans (see [Figure 2](#)). With the bombing of the Askariya mosque on February 22, 2006 and the subsequent surge in attacks on Iraqis, this disparity is expected to continue.

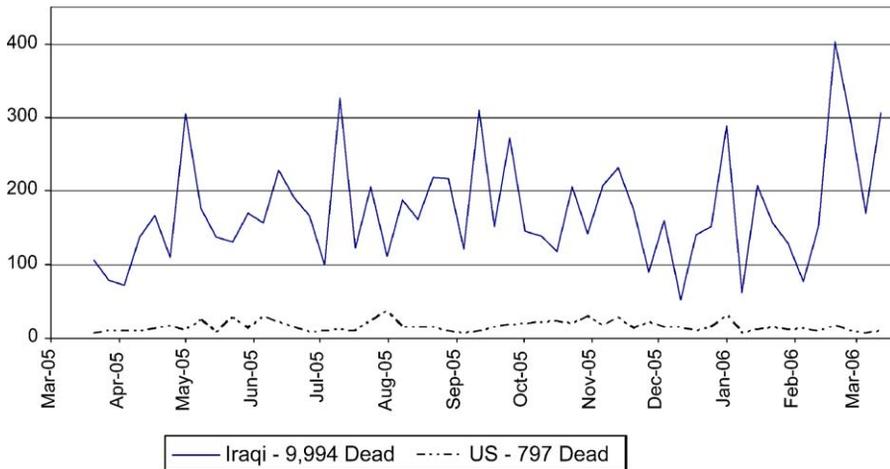
On December 23, 2005, the administration announced cuts in troop strength in Iraq.²⁰ At the end of the election phase, the U.S. had 160,000 troops in Iraq, up from the base level of 138,000 that prevailed early in 2005 to help insure security during the election cycle. Early in 2006, the United States was reported to have reduced troop strength to 133,000. The timing of further reductions is uncertain, and depends on achieving acceptable security and political conditions in Iraq.

For Iraqis during the disengagement phase, there were few spectacular attacks at first, as the insurgents returned to fight only slowly after their unilateral truce before the parliamentary election. On January 10, 2006 as part of a brief surge in violence between New Year’s Day and the Id al-Adha festival starting on the 12th, 18 Iraqis were killed at an awards ceremony attended by the American ambassador. On January 30, *ABC News* anchor Bob Woodruff and his cameraman, in the country to report on improvements in the

¹⁹ Kirk Semple, “U.S. Forces Try New Approach: Raid and Dig In” *New York Times*, Dec. 5, 2005.

²⁰ Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Plans Slight Force Cut, Up to 5,000 Troops, in Iraq,” *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 2005.

Figure 2. Trends in U.S. and Iraqi Fatalities Year 3 of Iraq War, ending March 2006



Note: 965 Iraqi fatalities at the bridge stampede on August 31, included in the count of total dead, have been removed from this chart to avoid skewing the graph.

security situation, were seriously wounded by an IED. Then with the bombing of the Askariya mosque on February 22, the truce was brutally shattered and insurgent attacks against Iraqis increased once again.

For U.S. forces, the disengagement phase yielded a comparatively low level of fatalities, repeating a pattern of decline that occurred at the end of years one and two. While eighteen U.S. soldiers died on January 7, matching the worst day of the prior year, that of the Haditha bombing in August, U.S. military fatalities during the Disengagement phase were 163, or 12 per week, down from 16 per week during the Election phase. The third year ended with 5,827 U.S. military wounded and 797 dead (6,624 total). Cumulative U.S. military casualties in Iraq for the three years ending March 19, 2006 were 19,587: 17,269 wounded and 2,318 dead.

As year four begins, the war remains extremely dangerous for Americans and Iraqis. On March 13, in a speech at George Washington University, President Bush warned, “I wish I could tell you that the violence is waning and that the road ahead will be smooth. It will not. There will be more tough fighting and more days of struggle—and we will see more images of chaos and carnage in the days and months to come.”

Conclusion

In the third year of the Iraq War, the U.S. succeeded in bringing the Iraqi election cycle to fruition, replacing the Transitional Administrative Law and National Assembly with a new constitution and parliamentary government.

In resisting the electoral cycle, the insurgency succeeded in bifurcating its efforts, coordinating its attacks against both U.S. troops and Iraqis, killing a combined total of nearly 11,000 people and wounding far more. With pressures rising for Iraqis to “stand up as we stand down,” continued success for the United States, in the form of creating the conditions for withdrawal, depends on whether the Iraqis can form a government that has the will and the ability to stand up alone to the rampant civil strife of the bifurcated insurgency.

