

Big Issue: Iraq still on voters' minds

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MECHANICSBURG, Penn. (AP) - For all the talk about the economy, voters have the war in Iraq on their minds, too, in the leadup to Election Day. They're worried about supporting the troops and caring for war veterans, debating who can best lead the military, and wondering how and when the U.S. should get out.

Democrat Barack Obama rose above his primary opponents in part because his opposition to the war gave him an argument for judgment that he would use throughout the remainder of his campaign.

Republican John McCain was largely written off as a candidate until the security situation in Iraq improved under the surge strategy that he had long advocated.

An Associated Press-Yahoo News survey taken this month shows that 74 percent of voters say the war in Iraq remains a very important or extremely important issue for them.

Come Nov. 5, the president-elect will face protracted conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan that so far have cost the lives of more than 4,000 coalition troops and left more than 65,000 wounded.

"The insurgencies we face today are really, I'd say, the most complex in history," said Dr. Conrad Crane, director of the U.S Army Military History Institute in Carlisle, Pa.

"What we are running into in places like Iraq are nested insurgencies. A bunch of different combatants and different problems. Often they each take a different approach, which makes for a very complex campaign plan."

As the new president takes office, he will be striving to draw down American forces without compromising still-fragile gains in Iraq.

"It won't be a walk in the park; there will still be some violence there. It will be a situation that may not seem to us like a perfect security environment. But as long as it's acceptable to Iraqis, and the region remains stable, that should be acceptable to us," Crane said.

A look at how four Americans view the war in Iraq:

ANDREW BROWN, 36, Mechanicsburg, Pa.

When Brown, an Army reservist, returned from Iraq in 2005, he sought treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder. What he got was a seemingly endless cycle of paperwork and delays.

Brown eventually met with a psychiatrist who gave him medication for his anxiety. The side effect a downward spiral into a suicidal depression.

"Very shortly after taking the prescribed dose, I found myself on the floor in my apartment, in tears, with my pistol in my mouth," Brown said.

The experience led him to look elsewhere for help: He relies almost entirely on the support of his fellow soldiers and prayer to cope with his PTSD.

Brown is now a representative for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a nonpartisan advocacy group, and pushes for better medical care at veteran's hospitals, which are often underfunded and understaffed.

"They are unable to provide the level of care, in a lot of instances, that the soldiers need," he said.

In 2005, Brown watched millions of Iraqis head to the polls for their first free election in more than 50 years. Though he declined to say who he's supporting for president, he hopes more Americans take an example from the Iraqis and turn out to vote.

NATHAN WEBSTER, 40, Portsmouth, N.H.

Webster strongly opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, but found himself doing little more than complaining about a war in which he felt he had no personal stake.

"That's not a particularly American way of living one's life," he said.

In 2007, Webster decided to go to Iraq as a freelance photographer. His goal was to document the stories of individual soldiers for their hometown newspapers.

Having served in Iraq with the Army in 1991, Webster thought he knew what he was getting into. But the country he returned to was far different from what he remembered.

"Compared to the Iraq of today, that was a camping trip," Webster said.

Seeing the situation on the ground firsthand didn't change Webster's opposition to the original invasion. But he worries about what would happen if the U.S. left.

"We can't leave because to do that betrays what we've done to the Iraqis who are trying to rebuild their country," he said. "But we can't stay because they don't want us to."

Webster is voting for Barack Obama, not just because of his positions on the war, but because of what an Obama victory could mean for the country.

"America wins if Barack Obama becomes president because it validates America," he said. "It says we've turned our back on the past."

AMELIA PHILLIPS, 48, Dinuba, Calif.

Phillips' 23-year-old son has served two tours in Iraq with the Army. He'll likely serve a third.

No mother wants to send her child into harm's way, Phillips said. But she believes strongly that her son's mission in Iraq is keeping Americans safe at home.

"It's difficult to say I support the war," Phillips said. "I know my son will probably have to go back but it's a necessary evil because freedom truly isn't free."

Phillips believes more Americans felt the same way after the Sept. 11 attacks. But as time passes, she worries that fewer people understand the sacrifice soldiers and their families have made.

"We need to remember that day did happen and if we are not careful, that day can come again," she said.

Phillips plans to cast her vote for Republican John McCain because she values the experience he would bring to the office of the presidency and to the Iraq war.

"I believe he has a better grasp of what needs to transpire in order to secure our life as we know it," she said.

RICHARD GRAVES, 63, Seattle

When Graves looks at McCain, he sees a bit of himself.

Graves served in the Vietnam War about the same time as the Republican presidential nominee, and counts his military service as one of the defining periods of his life.

"It allowed us to be able to handle the adversity of the combat itself and the political turmoil," Graves said.

As a veteran, Graves said, the Iraq war is one of the most important issues he's looking at in the presidential election. He supported the troop surge, and believes McCain's military experience will help him develop a better relationship with commanders on the ground than Obama could establish.

"He will allow the military to do the military's job, and I think that's what has been needed," he said.

Graves has switched political parties a few times in his life. These days, he leans Republican and will likely vote for McCain. Still, in the last few days of the election, Graves is willing to listen to what both candidates have to say.

"My one vote does make a difference," he said. "It makes you a winner whether your party won or not."