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## March of the Imperial Senators

**John McCain and Lindsey Graham try to rewrite history to vindicate the Iraq war, and blame Obama for ISIS.**

By KELLEY VLAHOS

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As Ramadi falls, hawks offer comfort in the argument that at least Iraq's current troubles with ISIS can all be laid at President Obama's feet. In the face of well-documented Iraqi reality, they are reviving the stale Vietnam-era trope to say that—if only the United States had the conviction to stay a little longer—it would have “won.”

The reviser-in-chief is none other than Sen. John McCain. McCain was Washington's greatest advocate for the invasion and occupation of Iraq, and he hated that the U.S. ever left. No doubt he dislikes President Obama, who thwarted the elder man's bid for the White House in 2008, even more.

Just last week he told reporters that President Obama's strategy for curbing the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, was “one of the most disgraceful episodes in American history.” McCain's widely known and tolerated flair for the dramatic now places an “episode” that most Americans could not rightly pin down, much less explain without the aid of Google, alongside slavery, the Trail of Tears, the federal crackdown on World War I-era Bonus Marchers, and the entire Vietnam War.

His partner in this long-running routine, Sen. Lindsey Graham, also reminiscent of Dr. Strangelove's Gen. Buck Turgidson (“Mr. President, we must not allow a mineshaft gap!”), laid out the latest talking points in an interview about the ISIS takeover of Ramadi in Iraq this month:

It's a predictable outcome of withdrawing all forces back in 2011...The military advised [Obama] to leave 10,000 troops. When he refused to take their advice, everything you see before you is a result of that big mistake.

Graham, McCain, and their fellow Republican hawks, energized by an election over a year away, are once again using foreign policy overseas to bludgeon Obama, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, and by extension, the whole Democratic Party in the arena of domestic politics here at home. It's a deadly fandango that places national security in the balance, while lawmakers play rhetorical games, often crossing, if not leaping, the usual boundaries of diplomatic propriety and control.

“Imperial senators, basically that's what they are ... playing this real life version of Risk,” said Matthew Hoh, an Iraq War veteran, referring to the strategy board game in an interview with *TAC*. Hoh was the highest U.S. official to resign in protest of the Afghanistan war policy when he quit his State Department post in 2009.

Hoh says playing “real life Risk” is all about deception, and in the case of Iraq, a larder of revisionist history, which, as McCain and Graham have demonstrated, involves an elaborate tweaking of the story of how the U.S. withdrew from Iraq in 2011, and why. It also requires the

ambitious assumption that a) American forces had every right and opportunity to stay there indefinitely, and b) there would be no consequences if they did so.

Therefore it is “Obama’s fault,” as Graham has said repeatedly, for not renegotiating the Status of Forces Agreement, which codified the complete pull-put of U.S. combat troops by 2011. His failure to do so was evidence of his willingness to put politics before the long-term security of the Middle East, or so they say. This not only squandered the surge “victory” led by Gen. David Petraeus’ in 2007, but the vacuum Obama left set the stage for the Islamic State and its rampage across Syria, and Iraq.

“It’s revisionist, and it’s for political reasons, and it’s the same thing you hear from those who said we could have won the Vietnam War—we could have tried harder if the media had allowed it, or the hippies had allowed it,” said Hoh. “The reality was that Iraq was not going to allow us to stay. There was very little opportunity to let us stay in Iraq.”

Republican President George W. Bush deliberated and signed the withdrawal agreement in 2008 with Prime Minister Maliki, a man who the U.S. spent enormous sums of money and political capital keeping in office since 2006. When Obama was elected soon after, he endeavored to see it through. Publicly, he advocated for a small residual combat force to stay in the country to help the Iraqis. Privately, according to numerous reports, he and his staff argued with the Pentagon over how big that force would be. He wanted 5,000 or less, they wanted upwards of 10,000.

But it turned out that the Iraqis had other plans. There was plenty of Kabuki theatre, as Maliki was forced to manage a government his opponents said he did not rightfully earn the right to form after the 2010 election, while needing to appease the Iraqis who wanted to see the Americans go. He seemed to be telling the Americans privately he wanted a big U.S. presence left behind, while explaining to the *Wall Street Journal* in 2010, “this (SOFA) is not subject to extension, not subject to alteration. It is sealed.”

Negotiations reportedly wore on until the eleventh hour, but finally broke down when Maliki could not promise criminal immunity for U.S. troops there. “Frankly, given that less than 20 percent of the Iraqi public wanted American troops to stay, and given the great resentment in the Iraqi population ...there wasn’t much sympathy to grant Americans full legal immunities in the Iraqi parliament,” said former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey in 2014. The withdrawal was complete in 2011.

The rest as they say is history, but Republicans have written their own chapters to the story, seizing on private memoirs from departing members of the Obama court, either scorned and ready to talk or just eager for the limelight and their own political makeovers. A narrative has been woven into existence that says Obama didn’t “try hard enough,” that Maliki was willing to

bend but wasn't given the proper inducements, that the White House flubbed tactically, etc. From the reliably Republican *Washington Times* in June last year:

Once Mr. al-Maliki repeated his demand for criminal jurisdiction over U.S. forces, the Obama administration stopped talking, a former defense official said. The White House planned to pull out of Iraq instead of engaging in tough negotiations to reach a compromise.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta left his job in 2013 and wrote ruefully about the Iraq withdrawal a year later. In *Time* magazine, following the release of his memoirs in 2014, Panetta wrote, "the White House was 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." He claims "we had leverage," but offers nothing but the weak threat of withholding reconstruction aid. Nevertheless, his "tell all" was a boon for the war hawks, and Republicans have gobbled it up.

Writer Gareth Porter, on the other hand, argued in a 2011 article that it was Maliki's design all along to boot the Americans, and the SOFA was crafted that way despite the objections of Bush and the U.S. military. In the end, Bush was forced to agree to the 2008 document, lest he leave it up to chance that an incoming Democratic White House might pull out much sooner.

"A central element of the Maliki-Iran strategy was the common interest that Maliki, Iran and anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr shared in ending the U.S. occupation, despite their differences over other issues," wrote Porter.

Dexter Filkins breaks this down in his extensive, "What We Left Behind" for the *New Yorker* in 2014. Maliki needed al-Sadr's coalition support in the new parliament, so a deal was struck. Sadr would weigh in for Maliki, as long as Maliki promised that U.S. combat forces would leave.

While behind the scenes Iraqi politicians reportedly expressed interest in a long-term American combat presence, wrote Filkins, "(Maliki) argued that the long-standing agreement that gave American soldiers immunity from Iraqi courts was increasingly unpopular; parliament would forbid the troops to stay unless they were subject to local law." It gave him the out he needed.

The war hawks argue that if Obama had renegotiated the SOFA (basically forced a longer occupation), the U.S. would have helped the Iraqis repel growing al-Qaeda elements before they morphed into the Islamic State. This completely ignores the fact that it was our friend Maliki's suppressive and discriminatory treatment of the Sunnis that empowered the extremist elements. It also ignores the very real possibility that al-Sadr's Shia army, which had been standing down per agreements, may have re-emerged to fight the Americans themselves, along with the Iranian-backed militias that are now fighting ISIS in places like Ramadi.

“Sadr said he would put his army back on the streets if we were to stay,” Hoh said. Furthermore, “even if we put troops back there, the Islamic State and the Sunni were going to fight against the Shia-dominated military anyway. So we would have our troops in the middle of a civil war.”

Revisionism is a shopworn playbook employed to maintain support for the military and its operations overseas. The rewritten chapter on the Vietnam War, which claims the conflict would have been won if Washington had been more willing, was carried forward like a torch by Gen. Petraeus and his counterinsurgency “crusaders” in 2007 to garner support for escalating and protracting the Iraq War.

But not all history is so easily glossed over. The war hawks conveniently forget that McCain lost to Obama in 2008 for a host of reasons, not the least of which was that Bush had promised the American people both retribution after 9/11, and a transformation of the Middle East. What they got was endless war, with the worst yet to come in Afghanistan. They were tired, and preferred the so-called “anti-war” candidate to McCain’s dusty, faintly jingoistic rhetoric, which smelled like more of the same.

Despite what McCain & Co. say today, the country is split over putting so called “boots on the ground” in Iraq, or in Syria. The more the hawks call for military intervention, in fact, the more they remind Americans of the debacle that mired the U.S. there in the first place. The *Wall Street Journal* recently called it “an awkward election issue” that Republicans feel the need to dodge on the campaign trail.

“The GOP debating position is in tatters,” writes Juan Williams for *The Hill*. “Republican leaders refuse to admit that a Republican president made a terrible mistake in starting the war in Iraq. This sad political reality is a reflection of a culture of political polarization which has left much of the GOP base with their own set of beliefs, regardless of the objective facts.”