

# The Swamp

## Iraq calculus could tip presidential race

by Jim Tankersley and Christi Parsons

Second in an occasional series, [United States of Anxiety](#)

DOYLESTOWN, Pa. -- No war goes unremembered in Bucks County, and no soldier dies unheralded, even when the rest of the nation doesn't seem to pay much attention anymore.

This community north of Philadelphia once launched the sneak attack that turned the tide of the American Revolution. Now it is a supplier of fallen American troops in Iraq whose faces peer from canvas flags in the courthouse square. It also is a swing county in a swing state where, believe it or not, that war and those fallen troops could decide our next commander in chief.



Polls show the war in Iraq has dropped on the list of national priorities. But a wealth of research suggests the war's most painful costs -- the lives of our soldiers -- could sway the presidential election in battleground states across the country, starting here in Pennsylvania, where scholars argue Iraq casualties cost President George W. Bush the state's 21 electoral votes four years ago.

For all the passions that war inflames, it turns out, the conflict's impact on voters can be summarized with mathematical precision.

Conventional wisdom holds that this particular war could hurt Republican John McCain in his race against Democrat Barack Obama. But researchers suggest that might not be true.

Obama built his presidential campaign, in part, on his opposition to the war before it began and his plan to set a timetable for withdrawing troops. McCain, an ardent supporter of the war, touts his early call for the so-called "troop surge" that American generals credit in part for recent security gains in Iraq. The candidates have bickered over the progress of the Iraqi government and whether to maintain American bases after most troops leave the country.

But that debate skirts a central lesson of Iraq, a cost-benefit analysis of blood and sacrifice that should serve as a caution for future presidents as they pursue future wars. It misses the electoral pitfalls for both candidates in this war.

It misses the lessons of Doylestown and its ghosts.

### The casualty calculus

The Bucks County courthouse square anchors downtown Doylestown. At its edge rises an obelisk celebrating the 1,049 local men who served in the Civil War, including 150 who died. An arch commemorates World War II. There are shrines for Korea and World War I, a Gulf War plaque quoting Norman Schwarzkopf, and flags with photos for many of Bucks County's 17 Iraq and Afghanistan casualties.

Half a block downhill, activists gather regularly to silently picket the Iraq War.

Beneath a gnarled shade tree one warm afternoon, two friends debate the losses on their coffee break.

Diane Degen has a friend who was blinded in one eye while serving in Iraq. "He himself still believes we should be there," she says. "I think, to save this country, we need it."

Nancy Leh, 62, a lifelong Republican, calls ending the war the most important issue on her mind. The number of casualties makes her feel things are out of control. "We look like we're losing," she says, "and I can't stand that."

In those conflicting words lie a road map to the nation's thinking.

Pollsters have tracked America's support for every war since World War II. Researchers comb the results to decode why some wars attract broad approval and others sharp dissent.

Some Americans will support any war. Others, none at all. The vast middle, research suggests, weighs the loss of American blood with essentially the same sort of calculation we employ when buying a suit or a stereo.

The first half of the equation is simple: evaluating why we go to war. Richard Eichenberg, a political scientist at Tufts University, has studied decades of opinion polling on wars large and small. His research suggests Americans support sending troops on humanitarian missions or to protect national security. They don't like "peacekeeping" efforts or stepping into civil wars.

### **Defining victory**

The second half of America's casualty calculus: defining victory. Technology complicates it, argues Peter Feaver, a Duke University political scientist who has advised Bush and former President Bill Clinton on national security.

Americans today watch on CNN as "smart bombs" destroy enemy targets and conclude that winning a modern war requires fewer lives than a generation or two ago, Feaver and his colleagues argue. America's 4,000-troop death toll in Iraq is less than a tenth of its toll in Vietnam and about 1.5 percent of its losses in World War II. The fewer deaths, the easier it is for news organizations to show every fallen soldier and frame the war's costs in human terms.

In 2004, the costs of war nearly cost Bush re-election.

University of California-Berkeley professors Edward Miguel and David Karol analyzed the last presidential race and found a statistically significant correlation between a state's cumulative Iraq casualties through October 2004 and its change in vote share for Bush from the 2000 election to 2004. They calculated Bush lost 2 percentage points on average in the popular vote due to war deaths--enough to tip the 42 combined electoral votes of New Hampshire, Oregon, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania into Democrat John Kerry's hands.

If the months before the election had been bloodier in Iraq, Miguel said, Kerry might be president today. Separate studies from Vanderbilt University and Boston University suggest Iraq casualties cost Republicans House and Senate seats in 2006.

Under Miguel and Karol's 2004 analysis, Iraq would figure to hurt McCain this year even more than it

hurt Bush. American war deaths have tripled since 2004. More voters have lost faith in the war's mission.

But Miguel says too much has changed to apply the same reasoning this year. Voters may not associate McCain with the war as much as Bush. In the past year, the casualty rate has slowed dramatically; the research doesn't predict whether war deaths two years ago factor the same as deaths two weeks ago. And, Miguel adds, in recent months more voters appear to see a path to "victory" in Iraq, suggesting an upside for McCain.

"The storyline about the war has changed," Miguel said, "and that could change how people assess casualties."

If there's one group still very upset by the war and its costs, Eichenberg said, it's young people.

You find two of them sharing a table in the front window of the Bucks County Coffee Co., which looks uphill toward the Civil War obelisk and the war memorials beyond. Justin Elson types on a laptop. Jaymi Wolfgang reads a Bible. He is 30, she 21. He is working two jobs to foot college tuition. She is recently divorced from a Navy man who left for the Gulf on an aircraft carrier, she said, and came back a shell of himself.

Elson said Iraq has "developed into this nightmare that doesn't seem to end. ... There's no ending. There's no breakthrough. There's no villain, even. There's just people dying and getting hurt, and it's really expensive."

Death haunts one Bucks County swing voter, who knows the costs of war all too well.

It is late morning at the Doylestown Presbyterian Church graveyard, blocks from the memorial plaza. Sunday services are over. Lemonade is served in styrofoam cups in the maple-leaf shade. A warm breeze rustles the flags dotting the graves of young men who died in a century and a half of wars.

Bill Bishop stands among them and lets tears roll from behind square-rimmed glasses.

Bishop's family was Mennonite, and though he converted in childhood, he could have claimed conscientious objector status and skipped Vietnam. Instead he went to battle with the 25th Infantry Division.

"I'm going to tell you something I've never even told my wife," he says, "why I cry when I think about it. It seems like everybody else died. And I'm still living."

Bishop is a Republican who voted for George Bush, both father and son, and supported the first Gulf War. To win Pennsylvania and the nation, McCain must win over votes like him. And for now, Bishop is undecided.

He does not like this war. He saw no threat in Iraq, no global coalition behind the U.S. invasion. For McCain to persuade him, he'll have to make the case that Iraq is vital to American security. That America can win there.

That the soldiers pictured on the canvas flags near the courthouse died for something worthwhile.

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