Beyond Quagmire

A panel of experts convened by Rolling Stone agree that the war in Iraq is lost. The only question now is: How bad will the coming explosion be?

TIM DICKINSON

How bad will it be? Tell us what you think here.

The war in Iraq isn't over yet, but -- surge or no surge -- the United States has already lost. That's the grim consensus of a panel of experts assembled by Rolling Stone to assess the future of Iraq. "Even if we had a million men to go in, it's too late now," says retired four-star Gen. Tony McPeak, who served on the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War. "Humpty Dumpty can't be put back together again."

Those on the panel -- including diplomats, counterterror analysts and a former top military commander -- agree that President Bush's attempt to secure Baghdad will only succeed in dragging out the conflict, creating something far beyond any Vietnam-style "quagmire." The surge won't bring an end to the sectarian cleansing that has ravaged Iraq, as the newly empowered Shiite majority seeks to settle scores built up during centuries of oppressive rule by the Sunni minority. It will do nothing to defuse the powder keg that an independence-minded Kurdistan, in Iraq's northern provinces, poses to the governments of Turkey, Syria and Iran, which have long brutalized their own Kurdish separatists. And it will only worsen the global war on terror.

"Our invasion and occupation has created a cauldron that will continue to draw in the players in the Middle East for the foreseeable future," says Michael Scheuer, who led the CIA's hunt for Osama bin Laden. "By taking out Saddam, we have allowed the jihad to move 1,000 kilometers west, where it can project its power, its organizers, its theology into Turkey -- and from Turkey into Europe."

How bad will things get in Iraq -- and what price will the world ultimately pay for the president's decision to prolong the war? To answer those questions, we asked our panel to sketch out three distinct scenarios for Iraq: the best we can hope for, the most likely outcome and the worst that could happen.

The Rolling Stone Panel

Zbigniew Brzezinski
National security adviser to President Carter

Richard Clarke
Counterterrorism czar from 1992 to 2003
Nir Rosen
Author of *In the Belly of the Green Bird*, about Iraq's spiral into civil war, speaking from Cairo, where he has been interviewing Iraqi refugees

Gen. Tony McPeak (retired)
Member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War

Bob Graham
Former chair, Senate Intelligence Committee

Chas Freeman
Ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War; president of the Middle East Policy Council

Paul Pillar
Former lead counterterrorism analyst for the CIA

Michael Scheuer
Former chief of the CIA's Osama bin Laden unit; author of *Imperial Hubris*

Juan Cole
Professor of modern Middle East history at the University of Michigan

BEST-CASE SCENARIO
CIVIL WAR IN IRAQ AND A STRONGER AL QAEDA

Zbigniew Brzezinski: If we are willing to engage with all of Iraq's neighbors -- including Iran -- in a regional effort to contain the violence, the best we can hope for is an Iraq that is politically passive but hostile toward America.

Gen. Tony McPeak: It's not a question of whether we're going to leave Iraq -- it's a question of when. And everybody in Iraq knows that. So they say, "Fine. We'll stock arms and wait for you guys to leave. And then we'll do what we want."

*But the administration has repeatedly highlighted the potential for chaos in Iraq after our departure as a reason we must stay and fight.*

Richard Clarke: All the things they say will happen are already happening. Iraq is already a base for terrorists; there is already a civil war. We've got 150,000 troops there now and we can't stop it.

Nir Rosen: There is no best-case scenario for Iraq. It's complete anarchy now. No family is untouched by kidnappings, murders, ethnic cleansing -- everybody lives in a constant state of terror. Leaving aside Kurdistan, which is very different, there's nobody in Iraq who is safe. You can get killed for being a Sunni, for being a Shia, for being educated, for being part of the former regime, for being part of the current regime. The Americans are still killing Iraqi civilians left and right. There's no government in Iraq; it doesn't exist outside of the Green Zone. That's not only the government's fault, that's our fault: We deliberately created a weak government so that we would have final authority over everything in Iraq.

Michael Scheuer: Even in the best-case scenario, the disaster we're seeing now is nothing compared to the disaster that we'll see after we leave. The real issue here is American interest: The longer we stay, the more people we get killed. I don't think the longer we stay, the better we make Iraq. Probably the reverse.

Juan Cole: The civil war will go on for five or ten years -- that's inevitable. But the best-case scenario is, at the end of it they find a way to come back together as a nation-state, like Lebanon did in 1989.

Rosen: People are talking about a reconciliation process, but Iraqi Shias don't want to compromise with the Sunnis. They don't have to. There's going to be a genocide of Sunnis in Baghdad. The Shia have the numbers to do it; they can absorb all the Sunni car bombs it takes. The Americans aren't capable of stopping it; they can't tell a Sunni from a Shia. The best you
can hope for is that it doesn’t spill into the neighboring countries.

**McPeak:** You have to hope that Iraq devolves into a federal state with three strong regional governments. But that has its downsides: The Turks would go berserk. They would see Kurdistan as a base for the Kurdish insurgency inside Turkey, which has bedeviled them like the IRA in Ireland or the Basques in Spain. And if Iraq devolves into three separate "stans," then it's going to be pretty tough for Sunnistan not to provide a retirement home for Al Qaeda agents. It's got warts all over it -- but among the "don't call my baby ugly" possibilities in this world, that looks the prettiest.

*So even in the best of scenarios, Al Qaeda has a lasting base in Iraq?*

**Paul Pillar:** The president made it sound like Osama bin Laden is poised to march into Baghdad and take up residence in one of Saddam's old palaces and rule this terrorist state. Nothing of the sort is possible -- even as a worst-case scenario. It is true that five years from now, the same people honing their skills in Anbar province may form the cell that will try to pull off another 9/11. But that's going to happen regardless of what we do. We have the best chance of minimizing those sorts of costs by getting out. At least that takes away the anti-American cause célèbre effect of our presence there.

**Scheuer:** No matter what happens now, the Islamists will have beaten both of the superpowers -- first the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and now the United States in the heart of Islam. The impact of that in Islamic civilization is going to be enormous. We have made bin Laden a prophet: His organizing concept for Al Qaeda was "The Russians are a lot tougher than the Americans. If we can beat the Russians, then we can eventually beat the Americans." Even more important, Al Qaeda will have contiguous territory on the Arab peninsula to attack from.

*Where does that leave Israel?*

**Scheuer:** The neoconservatives and their war in Iraq have made Israeli security worse than at any time since 1967. You'll see more and more people trying to launch attacks in Israel who are not Palestinian or Lebanese. None of it bodes well for a Middle East peace settlement.

**MOST LIKELY SCENARIO**

YEARS OF ETHNIC CLEANSING AND WAR WITH IRAN

**McPeak:** We're going to see a full-scale intercommunal war that may not burn out until one side is all dead, all gone. The Kurds would like to sit on the sidelines, but I don't see how they stay out, especially up in the Kirkuk area, where they sit on a lot of oil. This is going to be ethnic cleansing like we had in Kosovo or Bosnia -- but written big, in capital letters. And we can't stop it.

**Bob Graham:** If you're looking for an analogy, it's going to be a heightened version of the civil war that ravaged Lebanon for fifteen years.

**Scheuer:** There isn't any upper limit to how many people could get killed. Depending on how long the war lasts -- a million casualties?

*So what kind of government is Iraq most likely to be left with when all is said and done?*

**McPeak:** A Shia dictatorship headed by some lieutenant colonel who we don't even know yet. It's a restoration of Saddam Hussein, except now he's Shia, and maybe he's in religious robes rather than a uniform.

*So forget about democracy?*

**Pillar:** Stability and lowering the bloodshed is the range of outcomes and expectations we ought to be talking about now, not looking for Switzerland on the Tigris or anything remotely resembling a liberal democracy. A Shia Saddam -- without nearly as much brutality, but still a strongman -- is actually one of the best hopes.

**Chas Freeman:** The most efficient way to avoid mass killings is to help the Shiites win fast, consolidate their damn dictatorship and get the hell out. The level of anarchy and hatred and emotional disturbance is such that it's very hard to imagine anything except a Saddam-style reign of terror succeeding in pacifying the place.
Where does that leave us with regard to Iran?

**McPeak:** Iran's influence will have been increased geometrically. We're already the losers in this, and now we become the big-time losers.

**Freeman:** The net effect of our policies has been to make the area safe for Iran, which I guess is why we're now threatening attacks on Iran.

**Rosen:** Our Sunni allies in the region, the so-called moderate states -- dictatorships like Jordan and Saudi Arabia -- are pushing the U.S. to switch sides and support the Sunnis. We've been working up to that, obviously. The whole buildup to a new war against Iran, which sounds so much like the buildup in 2002, is part of that. You no longer hear about Al Qaeda in Iraq. More and more we're hearing about Iran and Shias.

**Graham:** This administration seems to be getting ready to make -- at a much more significant, escalated level -- the same mistake we made in Iran that we made in Iraq. If Iraq has been a disaster, this would be multiple times Iraq. The extent to which this could be the horror of the twenty-first century is hard to exaggerate.

**Brzezinski:** If the war continues without any American willingness to accommodate regionally and to pull out, the Iraq War will be extended to Iran. And if we get involved in a war with Iran, that raises the prospect of a twenty-year-long involvement in protracted violence in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and probably Pakistan. I'm not a prophet, but if the president doesn't change course, then the more grim prognosis is a likely one.

**WORST-CASE SCENARIO**
**WORLD WAR III**

**Freeman:** This could become the Islamic equivalent of the Thirty Years War between Protestants and Catholics in Europe in the 1600s -- a religious schism that blossoms into overt mayhem and murder and massacres and warfare. The various Iraqi factions will obtain the backing of other Middle Eastern states as they conduct their ideological and ethnic struggles. It will be a free-for-all that spreads beyond the anarchic zone of Iraq.

**Scheuer:** The Shiites in Iran will not tolerate the re-emergence of a Sunni government in Iraq. And the last thing the Saudis, Kuwaitis, Egyptians, Jordanians and the rest of the Sunni-dominated states will tolerate is letting the Shia control another oil-rich state in the Muslim heartland. So you're going to see those states running guns and money to Sunni fighters in Iraq. For Jordan and Egypt, this is a golden opportunity to send their young firebrands to fight in Iraq as they did in Afghanistan. It's kind of a pressure-release valve for Sunni dictatorships: People who would be out causing problems because their governments aren't Islamic enough will be out in Iraq fighting the ultimate heretics, the Shia.

**Clarke:** I find it difficult to walk through the scenario which creates the wider regional war. The Saudi, Jordanian and Syrian leaders are all rational. The Iranians, despite what we may think of them, are very rational actors, from their perspective. So the idea that any of these nations is going to want to have a multination war is hard to understand. These scenarios the administration talks about for wider regional war remind me of the "domino effect" in Vietnam. We were always told while in Vietnam that if we pulled out, it would result in the fall of Indonesia, the fall of Malaysia, the fall of Thailand, the fall of the Philippines. And, of course, it didn't.

**Graham:** I disagree. I believe the chance that the chaos in Iraq could bring countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia into the mix is in the forty to fifty percent range. The big danger is what I call the August 1914 Syndrome. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo -- what would have been in the scale of history a minor event -- set in motion activities that turned out to be beyond the ability of the Western powers to control. And they ended up in one of the most brutal wars in man's history by accident. If the Saudis come in heavily on the side of the Sunnis, as they have threatened to do, and the Iranians -- directly or through shadow groups like Hezbollah -- become active on behalf of the Shiites, and the Turks and the Kurds get into a border conflict, the flames could spread throughout the region. The real nightmare beyond the nightmare is if the large Islamic populations in Western Europe become inflamed. Then it could be a global situation.
**Rosen:** Iraq will be the battleground where the Sunni-Shia conflict will be fought, but it won't be limited to Iraq. It will spread. Pandora's box is open. We didn't just open it, we opened it and threw fuel into it and threw matches into it. You'll soon see Sunni militias destabilizing countries like Jordan and Syria -- where the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood is very strong. It took about ten years for the Palestinians to become politicized and militarized when they were first expelled from Palestine. You're likely to see something like that occurring in the huge Iraqi refugee populations in Syria and Jordan. King Abdullah of Jordan is resented for being an American stooge and an accomplice with Israel. I'm convinced that the monarchy in Jordan will fall as a result of this, and Israel will be confronted with a frontline state on its longest border with an Arab country.

**Scheuer:** I can't help but think we've signed Jordan's death warrant. The country is already on a simmering boil because of the king's oppression of Islamists. It could turn into a police state like Egypt, or an incoherent, revolving-door-type government like Lebanon is becoming now.

**Rosen:** You're going to see borders changing, governments falling. Lebanon is already on the precipice. Throughout the region, government officials are terrified. Nobody knows how to stop it. This is World War III. How far will it spread? Anywhere there are Islamic movements, like in Somalia, in Sudan, in Yemen. Pakistan has always had Sunni-Shia fighting. The flow of Iraqi refugees will at some point affect Europe.

**McPeak:** The worst case? Iraq's Sunnis begin to be backed into a corner, then the Sunni governments -- Jordan, Saudi Arabia -- jump in. Israel sees that it's threatened by these developments. Once the Israelis get involved, then everybody piles on. And you've got nuclear events going off in the Middle East. That would be about as bad as it could get.

*Not to be crass, but what does that kind of conflict do to the global oil supply?*

**Cole:** During the war between Iraq and Iran, Saddam and Khomeini didn't destroy each other's oil-producing capabilities, because they knew it would make each of them a Fourth World country. But if you get a big multicountry guerrilla war, guerrillas could do what they've been doing in northern Iraq: Hit the oil pipelines. Guerrillas aren't calculating it the way states are as far as mutually assured destruction. If you got pipeline sabotage in Iran and Saudi Arabia and southern Iraq, you could take twelve percent of the world's petroleum production off the market. That looks like the second Great Depression.

**McPeak:** This is a dark chapter in our history. Whatever else happens, our country's international standing has been frittered away by people who don't have the foggiest understanding of how the hell the world works. America has been conducting an experiment for the past six years, trying to validate the proposition that it really doesn't make any difference who you elect president. Now we know the result of that experiment *[laughs]*. If a guy is stupid, it makes a big difference.

*How bad will it be? Tell us what you think here.*

Posted Mar 07, 2007 8:20 AM