

# Iraq, anyone?

By James Reston Jr.

**A** year from now, no matter who is elected, this country will inaugurate a post-war president. Depending on the continued success of the troop surge, the growing confidence of Iraqi authority and the safety of the withdrawal, the details might be different. But essentially, the nightmare of Iraq will be over and a new era of U.S. history will begin. So why are none of the candidates putting forward their vision of the post-Iraq era in America?

Instead, the primary campaign is focused on issues that have been around for years. Politicians have been haggling about energy, special interests, climate change, terrorism, health care and immigration since the early 1990s. None of these issues defines a new era.

The desperate imperative of the post-Iraq era is to repair the terrible damage that this war has done to the basic fabric of the nation and to its standing in the world. Reconciliation and reconstruction after Iraq is the great undiscussed issue of this campaign. The voters in the primaries should be asking themselves who among the candidates has the right temperament to preside over the healing of the nation.

Historically, the country has been in this situation twice. The aftermaths of the American Civil War and the Vietnam War are the reference points for 2009. In both instances, the amnesty issue was the catalyst. After the Civil War, the citizenship status of Southern rebels had to be addressed if the nation was again to be unified. In that case, the need was for the reconciliation of the two sections of the country. After the Vietnam War, the issue was the more than 50,000 war resisters who had fled to Canada. Their situation had to be addressed, and eventually it was, when Jimmy Carter proclaimed a presidential pardon the day after his inauguration in January 1977. In that case, the need was for reconciliation between the older and the younger generations.

Both Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter had the right temperament to preside over the final exit from Vietnam and the healing of the nation after Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. They were "experienced" enough and "tough" enough to be president. But they did not present the snarl of the warrior. What they gave and what the nation needed after divisive war and terrible scandal was a peacemaker.

## Politician debate misplaced

With Iraq, there is no catalytic issue driving a need for reconciliation domestically. But there is such a need internationally. That need is for reconciliation with the Islamic world. What is the program of the candidates to change our crusader image? When Islam is invoked in the political debate, the phrase we hear is violent Islamic extremism. The focus of our political debate is on the handful of Islamic criminals rather than on the billions of peace-loving believers of the world's fastest growing religion.

A true reconstruction of America after the di-



By Sam Ward, USA TODAY

**Why aren't presidential candidates talking about the postwar era and how they would repair the damage this terrible war has done to the nation? After all, our own reconstruction is at stake.**

process must be cleansed of the abuses, missteps, distortions and outright lies that have been committed in our name, so that the mistakes of Iraq are never repeated again. It was precisely because there was no formal process of reconstruction after Vietnam, apart from the amnesty issue, that the lessons of that war were not learned and the mistakes of elective, aggressive American warfare were repeated.

What could the elements of a U.S. reconstruction after Iraq be? I can imagine five elements:

► First, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. South Africa after apartheid provides the model for such a commission. With the 9/11 Commission and the Baker-Hamilton Commission, the tradition of outside, blue-ribbon panels has already been established. Such a commission needs a leader with the moral stature of Bishop Desmond Tutu.

► Second, Iraq Papers. The release of the Pap-

We need an equivalent disclosure now. Did the government struggle internally with the Iraq decision? What went on inside when the war turned sour? We don't know. Hopefully, it will not require another Daniel Ellsberg to find out.

## Jettison volunteer army

► Third, the end of the Volunteer Army. The establishment of the volunteer army in 1973 was a cynical and highly effective tool to take the younger generation out of U.S. political life. It has worked very well in the Iraq adventure: The silence of youth has been deafening. With the next proposal for a risky, elective, aggressive American war, the young generation who will fight it needs to be heard from. A universal draft or universal public service requirement needs to be enacted as part of reconstruction.

► Fourth, peace with Islam. A sweeping plan to reconcile America with Islamic nations must begin. The damage of the invasion, torture, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo could take generations and many presidencies to reverse, but the process must begin.

► Fifth, the Bush interviews. A few years from now, an extensive set of interviews with the ex-president should take place along the lines of David Frost's famous interviews with Richard Nixon in 1977. Let Bush profess to be another Harry S. Truman and argue that history will vindicate him. To watch him flounder with that weak argument in the face of serious scrutiny would be part of our collective catharsis.

James Reston Jr. is the author of *The Conviction of Richard Nixon*. He was the lead researcher and