When he started campaigning in 2007, Barack Obama reiterated his strong opposition to the Iraq War, which had by then degenerated into a violent and bloody civil war that the United States was struggling to control. His engagement with the issue had three advantages: to emphasize the consistency of his positions, since he had opposed the war since 2002; to differentiate himself from his rival Hillary Clinton, who had supported George W. Bush in this matter without careful consideration; and to create a wedge between him and his Republican rivals who were burdened by the legacy of Bush. This is when he developed his famous tale of two wars: war of choice (Iraq) and war of necessity (Afghanistan). The clever distinction was designed to convince the American public that a withdrawal from Iraq would not be costly because it did not respond to any strategic necessity, while the fight against those responsible for the September 11 attacks—Al Qaeda—justified an increased commitment in Afghanistan.

Obama had just arrived in office when he requested a thorough assessment of American policy in Iraq. Less than a month later, he announced its conclusions, which garnered widespread agreement because they were expected: withdrawal of combat troops on August 31, 2010, and total withdrawal of American forces in December 2011.

If Obama was able to define an exit strategy from Iraq in less than a month, even though this was the most important American military intervention since the Vietnam War, it is simply because the military and political conditions for the withdrawal had been negotiated by his predecessor just before he left. In January 2009, the Obama administration started to work on implementing the two agreements signed between the United States and Iraq in November 2008: the
Limited Achievements

Strategic Framework Agreement, which defined the terms of cooperation between the two countries, and the Security Agreement, which set out the terms for the withdrawal of American forces and for military cooperation between the two states. The latter agreement came into effect on January 1, 2009. It was the last major foreign policy action of the Bush administration, which thus symbolically brought closure to the Iraqi issue that it had deliberately opened by invading the country in March 2003.

The Iraqis agreed to the conditions because they understood how they could benefit from the Bush administration’s desire to end this matter on a successful note, be it only symbolic. Yet the war that dominated American and international foreign policy for more than six years (2002–2006) has all but been forgotten. US attention has shifted to Afghanistan and Pakistan as if this war had never happened, as if there were no lessons to be drawn from it, and as if the divide between war of choice and war of necessity was as great as it was officially portrayed. This short political memory is probably the first great lesson of the Iraq War. It undoubtedly derives from the material and political superpower of the United States, which for the first time in its history had to deal with two politico-military conflicts one after another: Iraq and Afghanistan. Simply withdrawing from Iraq is no trivial operation, however. It involves the repatriation of 128,000 troops and 119,000 civilian contractors, let alone the 3.3 million pieces of military equipment worth the colossal sum of $45.8 billion. This in addition to all the projects launched since 2003 for which funding is no longer guaranteed as the United States seeks to financially disengage from Iraq. This conflict alone has cost the United States $784 billion in constant dollars since 2003. At the same time, one hundred thousand soldiers were deployed for operations in Afghanistan at the end of 2010, as if the United States were now destined to always be at war in the Middle East. No country in the world can intervene simultaneously in this way on such a broad scale.

There is a current tendency to consider Iraq as some kind of political error that is attributable to the neoconservatives. The latter may be overwhelmingly responsible, but nothing could be more irresponsible than to forgo learning the deep lessons from this conflict. The reasons for intervention aside, it raises a number of fundamental questions that have inevitably arisen again in Afghanistan, and that have faced the United States since the end of the Cold War: What is the purpose of military operations in complex and segmented societies, where the state is often weak but nationalism remains very strong? What is America’s