

As he leaves Iraq this week, the outgoing US commander, General David Petraeus, is sounding far less optimistic than the Republican presidential candidate, John McCain, about the American situation in Iraq. General Petraeus says that it remains "fragile", recent security gains are "not irreversible" and "this is not the sort of struggle where you take a hill, plant the flag and go home to a victory parade... it's not a war with a simple slogan."

Compare this with Sarah Palin's belief that "victory in Iraq is wholly in sight" and her criticism of Barack Obama for not using the word "victory". The Republican contenders have made these claims of success for the "surge" – the American reinforcements sent last year – although they are demonstrably contradicted by the fact that the US has to keep more troops, some 138,000, in Iraq today than beforehand.

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