mistakes, or been reprimanded or sidelined for tactical, operational or strategic errors, is troubling to many officers. In contrast, they point to the example of Israel, which had barely withdrawn all its troops from southern Lebanon before it launched investigations into the conduct of the war against Hizballah.

There have been previous suggestions of military missteps. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice touched a nerve in April when she said the U.S. had made "thousands of tactical errors" in Iraq. But many officers dismissed her comments as coming from a civilian politician. Others have criticized the military leaders for failing to dispute the flawed war plan set in motion by the President and his top advisers. "Flaws in our civilians are one thing; the failure of the Pentagon's military leaders is quite another," former Marine Lt. Gen. Greg Newbold wrote in TIME last spring. "Those are men who know the hard consequences of war but, with few exceptions, acted timidly when their voices urgently needed to be heard."

But in the past few months, a growing number of officers have expanded their criticism to the way the generals have conducted the war. Gen. George Casey, who has been in command in Iraq for more than two years, has been the target of some of these complaints. But he came to Iraq when the situation had already degenerated into a complex insurgent fight. More criticism is being directed at Abizaid, who was a key military planner for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Pentagon before becoming Director of the Joint Staff, and then No. 2 at CENTCOM to Gen. Franks.

On paper, Abizaid was the right officer at the right moment. An Arab-American graduate of West Point, Abizaid studied in the Middle East, speaks some Arabic (though he is far from fluent) and commanded troops with distinction in Grenada and Gulf War I. Even today, many senior and retired officers speak of Abizaid with reverence; Sen. John Warner, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has praised him as an "outstanding officer"; and not even his harshest critics question his commitment to service.

It is his military judgment that has raised questions. As Franks' second in command, some officers say, Abizaid shares the blame for the failure to plan for what would happen after the initial rush to Baghdad. But his more serious missteps, in the view of his critics, began when Abizaid took over from Franks in July 2003, two months after the infamous "end of major combat operations" speech by President George Bush. Among those mistakes: failing to keep enough troops in Iraq in the fall of 2003 to establish basic security; allowing the disbanding of the Iraq Army and de-Baathification; missing the first signs of a growing insurgency; and failing to replace commanders who couldn't adapt to fight the insurgency, including Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, the former top ground commander in Iraq who was allowed to quietly retire this year.

Abizaid is also accused of mishandling the campaign in Fallujah in April 2004. Following the gruesome killing of four contractors, he pressured the Marines — over their objections — to attack the town. Then he compounded the mistake, in the view of these officers, when, faced with complaints from the Iraqis and Arab media about high civilian casualties, he abruptly halted the attack, violating the usual practice of allowing commanders on the ground to control the tactical fight. Many analysts see it as a turning point that allowed the insurgency to expand and become more dangerous.

Abizaid is also drawing criticism for never asking, so far as anyone knows, for a significant increase in troops to impose security. Abizaid, says a former officer privy to details of military operations, "never wanted to commit more troops to Iraq." Early on he said the U.S. was an "antibody" in the Iraqi body politic and supported early