"off-ramps" from Iraq for our forces. Officers who served in Iraq say they asked for more forces several times, but those requests did not make it to the top. At least twice in meetings with President Bush in 2004 — once before the April 2004 Fallujah attack and again before another operation there in November — the President asked Abizaid if he had everything he needed and Abizaid said, "Yes sir."

Abizaid, says one critic, also failed to develop a successful strategy of clearing an area, then holding it with troops, and then rebuilding its social and economic institutions. He believed that the rebuilding ought to be left to the Iraqis, but he never ensured that the foundation of that strategy — the Iraqi Security Forces — were up to the job, this critic contends.

Even today, some officers say, Abizaid continues to speak in terms that don't match the fight on the ground in Iraq. "U.S. forces have never been defeated in a fight at platoon level or above and we never will," he told a military group last month. He's still missing the point, says one frustrated officer: "It's an irrelevant comparison because those types of encounters are rare or nonexistent in Iraq." Says another officer: "We're not fighting the Big Red Soviet Army here, we're dealing with hit-and-run guerrilla warfare."

Abizaid did not reply when asked by TIME to comment on the criticism. Abizaid does get credit, in the view of his critics, for being more honest about the facts on the ground, in many cases, than his boss, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. In the summer of 2003, after Rumsfeld had denied Iraq was facing an insurgency, Abizaid made his first appearance in the Pentagon press briefing room and boldly countered that in fact the U.S. was facing a guerrilla war. And last August, before Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, it was Abizaid who said Iraq was "as bad as I've ever seen it," and that it may be on the verge of civil war.

But Abizaid has also been a smart politician. He has never challenged the assertion by senior civilian leaders that the war was being won. The Abu Ghraib scandal did not scar him. The fact that Osama Bin Laden is still at large in the middle of his region of responsibility never really lands on his shoulders.

He also has carefully escaped responsibility for the failures in Iraq. One retired senior army officer shook his head and said, "John has been unacceptably distant from the issue of Iraq." Abizaid has allowed Gen. George Casey, the Iraq commander, to take the heat as questions about strategy — over which he has the ultimate responsibility — are raised in Washington. As the Iraq war grinds on, senior officers who have served in Iraq are reaching their own conclusions about Abizaid's role. Said one Iraq veteran: "I don't think history will treat John Abizaid well."