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The Real Disaster

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President Bush told Americans last night that failure in Iraq would be a disaster. The disaster is Mr. Bush's war, and he has already failed. Last night was his chance to stop offering more fog and be honest with the nation, and he did not take it.

Americans needed to hear a clear plan to extricate United States troops from the disaster that Mr. Bush created. What they got was more gauzy talk of victory in the war on terrorism and of creating a "young democracy" in Iraq.

In other words, a way for this president to run out the clock and leave his mess for the next one.

Mr. Bush did acknowledge that some of his previous tactics had failed. But even then, the president sounded as if he were an accidental tourist in Iraq. He described the failure of last year's effort to pacify Baghdad as if the White House and the Pentagon bore no responsibility.

In any case, Mr. Bush's excuses were tragically inadequate. The nation needs an eyes-wide-open recognition that the only goal left is to get the U.S. military out of this civil war in a way that could minimize the slaughter of Iraqis and reduce the chances that the chaos Mr. Bush unleashed will engulf Iraq's neighbors.

What it certainly did not need were more of Mr. Bush's open-ended threats to Iran and Syria.

Before Mr. Bush spoke, Americans knew he planned to send more troops to pacify lawless Baghdad. Mr. Bush's task was to justify that escalation by acknowledging that there was no military solution to this war and outlining the political mission that the military would be serving. We were waiting for him to detail the specific milestones that he would set for the Iraqis, set clear timelines for when they would be expected to meet them, and explain what he intended to do if they again failed.

Instead, he said he had warned the Iraqis that if they didn't come through, they would lose the faith of the American people. Has Mr. Bush really not noticed that the American people long ago lost faith in the Iraqi government — and in him as well? Americans know that this Iraqi government is captive to Shiite militias, with no interest in the unity, reconciliation and democracy that Mr. Bush says he wants.

Mr. Bush said yet again that he wanted the Iraqi government to step up to the task of providing its security, and that Iraq needed a law on the fair distribution of oil money. Iraq's government needs to do a lot more than that, starting with disarming the sectarian militias that are feeding the civil war and purging the police forces that too often are really death squads. It needs to offer amnesty to insurgents and militia fighters willing to put down their weapons. It needs to do those things immediately.

Iraq's Shiite-dominated government has heard this list before. But so long as Mr. Bush is willing to back that failed government indefinitely — enabling is the psychological term — Iraq's leaders will have no reason to move against the militias and more fairly share power with the Sunni minority.

Mr. Bush did announce his plan for 20,000 more troops, and the White House trumpeted a \$1 billion contribution to reconstruction efforts. Congress will debate these as if they are the real issues. But they are not. Talk of a "surge" ignores the other 132,000 American troops trapped by a

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failed strategy.

We have argued that the United States has a moral obligation to stay in Iraq as long as there is a chance to mitigate the damage that a quick withdrawal might cause. We have called for an effort to secure Baghdad, but as part of the sort of comprehensive political solution utterly lacking in Mr. Bush's speech. This war has reached the point that merely prolonging it could make a bad ending even worse. Without a real plan to bring it to a close, there is no point in talking about jobs programs and military offensives. There is nothing ahead but even greater disaster in Iraq.

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