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Victory Is Not an Option

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The Mission Can't Be Accomplished -- It's Time for a New Strategy

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Sunday, February 11, 2007; B01

The new National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq starkly delineates the gulf that separates President Bush's illusions from the realities of the war. Victory, as the president sees it, requires a stable liberal democracy in Iraq that is pro-American. The NIE describes a war that has no chance of producing that result. In this critical respect, the NIE, the consensus judgment of all the U.S. intelligence agencies, is a declaration of defeat.

Its gloomy implications -- hedged, as intelligence agencies prefer, in rubbery language that cannot soften *its* impact -- put the intelligence community and the American public on the same page. The public awakened to the reality of failure in Iraq last year and turned the Republicans out of control of Congress to wake it up. But a majority of its members are still asleep, or only half-awake to their new writ to end the war soon.

Perhaps this is not surprising. Americans do not warm to defeat or failure, and our politicians are famously reluctant to admit their own responsibility for anything resembling those un-American outcomes. So they beat around the bush, wringing hands and debating "nonbinding resolutions" that oppose the president's plan to increase the number of U.S. troops in Iraq.

For the moment, the collision of the public's clarity of mind, the president's relentless pursuit of defeat and Congress's anxiety has paralyzed us. We may be doomed to two more years of chasing the mirage of democracy in Iraq and possibly widening the war to Iran. But this is not inevitable. A Congress, or a president, prepared to quit the game of "who gets the blame" could begin to alter American strategy in ways that will vastly improve the prospects of a more stable Middle East.

No task is more important to the well-being of the United States. We face great peril in that troubled region, and improving our prospects will be difficult. First of all, it will require, from Congress at least, public acknowledgment that the president's policy is based on illusions, not realities. There never has been any right way to invade and transform Iraq. Most Americans need no further convincing, but two truths ought to put the matter beyond question:

First, the assumption that the United States could create a liberal, constitutional democracy in Iraq defies just about everything known by professional students of the topic. Of the more than 40 democracies created since World War II, fewer than 10 can be considered truly "constitutional" -- meaning that their domestic order is protected by a broadly accepted rule of law, and has survived for at least a generation. None is a country with Arabic and Muslim political cultures. None has deep sectarian and ethnic fissures like those in Iraq.

Strangely, American political scientists whose business it is to know these things have been irresponsibly quiet. In the lead-up to the March 2003 invasion, neoconservative agitators shouted insults at anyone who dared to mention the many findings of academic research on how democracies evolve. They also ignored our own struggles over two centuries to create the democracy Americans enjoy today. Somehow Iraqis are now expected to create a constitutional order in a country with no conditions favoring it.

This is not to say that Arabs cannot become liberal democrats. When they immigrate to the United States, many do so quickly. But it is to say that Arab countries, as well as a large majority of all

countries, find creating a stable constitutional democracy beyond their capacities.

Second, to expect any Iraqi leader who can hold his country together to be pro-American, or to share American goals, is to abandon common sense. It took the United States more than a century to get over its hostility toward British occupation. (In 1914, a majority of the public favored supporting Germany against Britain.) Every month of the U.S. occupation, polls have recorded Iraqis' rising animosity toward the United States. Even supporters of an American military presence say that it is acceptable temporarily and only to prevent either of the warring sides in Iraq from winning. Today the Iraqi government survives only because its senior members and their families live within the heavily guarded Green Zone, which houses the U.S. Embassy and military command.

As Congress awakens to these realities -- and a few members have bravely pointed them out -- will it act on them? Not necessarily. Too many lawmakers have fallen for the myths that are invoked to try to sell the president's new war aims. Let us consider the most pernicious of them.

1) We must continue the war to prevent the terrible aftermath that will occur if our forces are withdrawn soon. Reflect on the double-think of this formulation. We are now fighting to prevent what our invasion made inevitable! Undoubtedly we will leave a mess -- the mess we created, which has become worse each year we have remained. Lawmakers gravely proclaim their opposition to the war, but in the next breath express fear that quitting it will leave a blood bath, a civil war, a terrorist haven, a "failed state," or some other horror. But this "aftermath" is already upon us; a prolonged U.S. occupation cannot prevent what already exists.

2) We must continue the war to prevent Iran's influence from growing in Iraq. This is another absurd notion. One of the president's initial war aims, the creation of a democracy in Iraq, ensured increased Iranian influence, both in Iraq and the region. Electoral democracy, predictably, would put Shiite groups in power -- groups supported by Iran since Saddam Hussein repressed them in 1991. Why are so many members of Congress swallowing the claim that prolonging the war is now supposed to prevent precisely what starting the war inexorably and predictably caused? Fear that Congress will confront this contradiction helps explain the administration and neocon drumbeat we now hear for expanding the war to Iran.

Here we see shades of the Nixon-Kissinger strategy in Vietnam: widen the war into Cambodia and Laos. Only this time, the adverse consequences would be far greater. Iran's ability to hurt U.S. forces in Iraq are not trivial. And the anti-American backlash in the region would be larger, and have more lasting consequences.

3) We must prevent the emergence of a new haven for al-Qaeda in Iraq. But it was the U.S. invasion that opened Iraq's doors to al-Qaeda. The longer U.S. forces have remained there, the stronger al-Qaeda has become. Yet its strength within the Kurdish and Shiite areas is trivial. After a U.S. withdrawal, it will probably play a continuing role in helping the Sunni groups against the Shiites and the Kurds. Whether such foreign elements could remain or thrive in Iraq after the resolution of civil war is open to question. Meanwhile, continuing the war will not push al-Qaeda outside Iraq. On the contrary, the American presence is the glue that holds al-Qaeda there now.

4) We must continue to fight in order to "support the troops." This argument effectively paralyzes almost all members of Congress. Lawmakers proclaim in grave tones a litany of problems in Iraq sufficient to justify a rapid pullout. Then they reject that logical conclusion, insisting we cannot do so because we must support the troops. Has anybody asked the troops?

During their first tours, most may well have favored "staying the course" -- whatever that meant to them -- but now in their second, third and fourth tours, many are changing their minds. We see evidence of that in the many news stories about unhappy troops being sent back to Iraq. Veterans groups are beginning to make public the case for bringing them home. Soldiers and officers in Iraq are speaking out critically to reporters on the ground.

But the strangest aspect of this rationale for continuing the war is the implication that the troops are somehow responsible for deciding to continue the president's course. That political and moral responsibility belongs to the president, not the troops. Did not President Harry S. Truman make it clear that "the buck stops" in the Oval Office? If the president keeps dodging it, where does it stop? With Congress?

Embracing the four myths gives Congress excuses not to exercise its power of the purse to end the war and open the way for a strategy that might actually bear fruit.

The first and most critical step is to recognize that fighting on now simply prolongs our losses and blocks the way to a new strategy. Getting out of Iraq is the pre-condition for creating new strategic options. Withdrawal will take away the conditions that allow our enemies in the region to enjoy our pain. It will awaken those European states reluctant to collaborate with us in Iraq and the region.

Second, we must recognize that the United States alone cannot stabilize the Middle East.

Third, we must acknowledge that most of our policies are actually destabilizing the region. Spreading democracy, using sticks to try to prevent nuclear proliferation, threatening "regime change," using the hysterical rhetoric of the "global war on terrorism" -- all undermine the stability we so desperately need in the Middle East.

Fourth, we must redefine our purpose. It must be a stable region, not primarily a democratic Iraq. We must redirect our military operations so they enhance rather than undermine stability. We can write off the war as a "tactical draw" and make "regional stability" our measure of "victory." That single step would dramatically realign the opposing forces in the region, where most states want stability. Even many in the angry mobs of young Arabs shouting profanities against the United States want predictable order, albeit on better social and economic terms than they now have.

Realigning our diplomacy and military capabilities to achieve order will hugely reduce the numbers of our enemies and gain us new and important allies. This cannot happen, however, until our forces are moving out of Iraq. Why should Iran negotiate to relieve our pain as long as we are increasing its influence in Iraq and beyond? Withdrawal will awaken most leaders in the region to their own need for U.S.-led diplomacy to stabilize their neighborhood.

If Bush truly wanted to rescue something of his historical legacy, he would seize the initiative to implement this kind of strategy. He would eventually be held up as a leader capable of reversing direction by turning an imminent, tragic defeat into strategic recovery.

If he stays on his present course, he will leave Congress the opportunity to earn the credit for such a turnaround. It is already too late to wait for some presidential candidate for 2008 to retrieve the situation. If Congress cannot act, it, too, will live in infamy.

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