



IRAQ ENDGAME

By Harvey Sicherman

President Bush's January 10, 2007, speech announced the "endgame" for Iraq. His new strategy is intended to salvage an American policy sharply undermined by rising violence in Baghdad and falling support in the United States. Bush coupled this change with a call for new military and civilian capabilities, the better to wage the War on Terror. So ended the first phase of America's reaction to 9/11, namely the attempt to wage the struggle with "forces on hand," seeking swift decisive results at minimum sacrifice. In this context, the new Iraqi approach--and its outcome--will go far to shape the broader U.S. strategy for a "long war."

THE "THREE P's"

To understand Bush's dramatic change of course, we must revisit the Administration's original design for Iraq. Having defined the War on Terrorism to include states, not only groups, the President faced a choice: either change the policy of the government sponsoring terrorism, or change the government itself. In Afghanistan, once the Taliban refused to yield bin Laden, the United States had little choice but to upend the regime. In Iraq, Bush believed that Saddam's aggressive record, combined with his actual (and potential) weapons of mass destruction, justified a similar intervention.

The U.S. campaign in Afghanistan relied on infantry "rented" from the Northern Alliance plus Special Forces plus high technology precision bombing. "Nation" or "state-building" was not part of the plan. This was to be handled primarily by others after U.S.-led forces defeated the Taliban and a new Afghani government was installed.

Initial American success in freeing Kabul emboldened Bush and his advisors against Saddam. Iraq, in their view, already possessed some of the elements Afghanistan lacked--namely, a functioning government and infrastructure. But the U.S. (and British) forces had to carry the main burden of assault because there were no infantry to be hired. The campaign, as it emerged in March 2003, therefore aimed at a swift and surgical strike that would spare infrastructure while decapitating the top layer of Baathists and decimating Saddam's most loyal forces. Metaphorically, the United States meant to lop off the head, spare some of the fingers, and transplant a new political leadership drawn from influential exiles. Speed, precision, and "the light footprint" were keys to success for Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and his advisors. It would be a demonstration of the "revolution in military affairs": strategic warfare on the quick and cheap.

Already, by Fall 2003, not six months after the invasion, few of these assumptions still held. Yes, the campaign had unseated Saddam and his cohorts swiftly with very few U.S. casualties but the already decrepit Iraqi infrastructure spared by American attacks was promptly destroyed in the looting and vandalism that followed, while U.S. troops stood by. Worse, the exiles proved far more influential with different bureaucracies in Washington than anybody in Iraq. Worse yet, an insurgency had begun. Already in August, a sensational bombing had frightened the United Nations Mission out of Iraq. And Saddam himself was still at large.

American and British forces faced the full burden of a counterinsurgency campaign. Known by the military acronym of counterinsurgency, this involved the "three P's": first, to *pursue* the insurgents; second, to *protect* vital facilities; third, to *promote* reconstruction. The Americans, soldiers and civilians alike, were largely unprepared and untrained to do such classic counterinsurgency work and, in any event, there weren't enough of them. This made it impossible to seal the Syrian and Iranian borders, or to hold areas once pacified. (The British were better prepared but also too few and aware of London's desire to leave soon.) Moreover, the U.S. military structure designed for short, decisive engagements would be hard put to sustain a large residual force in Iraq. Certain specialist categories drawn from the part-time Reserves faced special strains. Whatever Washington's pronouncements, U.S. forces indicated by their posture and ground tactics that they were there for the short term, as the Defense Department constantly sought ways to reduce their number.

Bush decided not to ask Congress for a substantial enlargement of the active force, making do with the ten-division army. (His

father had nineteen in 1991.) Instead, the United States hoped that the shortage of coalition troops would be alleviated by new Iraqi units, successors to the old army abolished in May 2003, and free of former Baathists. These forces, however, would be expected to defend a state still being invented.

THE “THREE C’s”

Counterinsurgency also has a vital political component characterized by the “three C’s”. A new government must be able to: (1) *co-opt* important political groups, (2) *corrupt* others to cooperate; and (3) *coerce* those who refuse. Good counterinsurgency political policy reduces the “coercibles” to the smallest number. In Iraq, this could only work if the Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds were convinced that their ultimate objectives were unattainable -- namely, a new Sunni dictatorship, a Shiite Islamic Republic, or an independent Kurdistan. Three successive elections, however, all with heartening turnouts, produced a Shiite-religious-party-dominated government with an unfinished constitution, no final deal on oil revenue sharing, and a leadership beholden to Muqtada al Sadr, a Shiite cleric and militia leader violently opposed to both the constitution and the coalition.

Al Sadr was partly a self-inflicted American wound. A recipient of Iranian largesse, he had revolted against the United States in 2004 but escaped personal retribution. The attempt to “co-opt” him by allowing his party to run for parliament without modifying his platform or disarming his militia gave him two votes, one in the parliament and one in the streets. (A similar blunder allowed Hamas to win a majority in the Palestinian Authority and put Hezbollah in the Lebanese parliament.) Among highly fractured contending parties, this made him the prime minister maker on the basis of thirty seats. It took six months for U.S. pressure to undo the incumbent Ibrahim al-Jaafari, under whose passive tenure the police had been infiltrated by Shiite militias bent on killing Sunni civilians. The new Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, seemed more determined but was still dependent on Sadr. Meanwhile, the United States continued to turn over responsibilities to the Iraqis, especially in Baghdad.

AN INDECENT INTERVAL?

By Winter 2005-2006, rising violence, especially sectarian attacks in the capital, magnified the deficiencies of both the military and political dimensions of the U.S. strategy. There were not enough coalition forces to fulfill the “three P’s” and not enough political will to perform the “three C’s.” As the Sunni insurgency grew, with its al Qaeda cells bent on igniting religious strife, Shiites lost patience with Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani’s cautions against retaliation. The Americans had failed to quell the Sunnis, and failed to eliminate Sadr. Iraq was therefore ripe for the consequences of the al Samara Shiite Golden Mosque bombing in February 2006, when militias on both sides began to kill and pillage civilians at will.

Amidst these storms, a bipartisan Congressional group established the Iraq Study Group in early 2006. Its co-chairmen, former Secretary of State James A. Baker, III, and former U.S. Representative Lee Hamilton, sought a new policy for Iraq, success defined as “stability” rather than democracy. Baker insisted on Bush’s reluctant personal approval of the Commission, although no President likes to be second-guessed by Congress and none of the commissioners themselves had been advocates of the American invasion.

Armed with forty-four experts, extensive interviews, and one frightening trip to Iraq, the Study Group’s direction was shaped by two developments, one in Baghdad, the other in Washington. Following the Maliki government’s assumption of power, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the streets of Baghdad in favor of the Iraqi police allowed these thoroughly corrupt and sectarian forces to run riot in the city, especially after the Samara bombing. As Baghdad sank into violence, so did Bush’s poll ratings. In November’s elections, the Republicans lost control of Congress. This political “thumping,” as Bush called it, dramatically shifted power in Washington. His Iraq policy stood repudiated.

The Study Group’s Report, issued December 6, 2006, featured a bipartisan compromise between Republican insistence on not abandoning Iraq and Democratic insistence on immediate troop withdrawals. March 2008 was chosen as the date when U.S. combat soldiers might leave. Meantime their mission, and that of a residual force, would change from combat to training.

This recommendation left an obvious question. So dire was the Iraq Study Group’s description of Iraq, did not such a policy mean “an indecent interval” -- namely, that even before March 2008, Iraq might collapse in the wake of waning American military power? The Iraq Study Group’s answer was to make specific demands on the Iraqi government, which, if undertaken, would merit U.S. support and, if not, accelerate the withdrawal. Furthermore, the Iraq Study Group argued that Iraq should be “embedded” in a larger policy toward the region, one that assembled a coalition to stabilize the country. This would be greased by a heavy U.S. diplomatic effort to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and negotiations with Syria and Iran, both of whom were presumed to oppose the disintegration of Iraq.

Baker insisted that the Report, complete with seventy-nine recommendations, should not be treated as a “fruit salad” but eaten whole. He and Hamilton received a critical reception by the Senate Armed Services Committee; it appeared to some, especially Senator John McCain, as militarily impractical and a barely disguised cut and run; while to others, it was an attempt to impose a Congressional study on the Executive; and to many others, especially the newly-empowered Democrats, as too slow a departure.

Baker himself revealed that he had already sounded out Damascus and Tehran. The Iranians were not interested in helping; the Syrians, depicted by Baker as key to Iraq, Lebanon, and Israeli security, especially through the Palestinian issue, wanted to talk. It was not clear why either country would assist the United State at an acceptable price but, argued Baker, it didn’t hurt to try. The former Secretary of State seemed to be angling for some new international conference, modeled after the 1991

Madrid gathering, overlooking that the earlier success had come after America's victory in Kuwait, a dramatic contrast to impending defeat in Iraq.

BUSH REACTS

It was, of course, ludicrous to expect that Bush (or any president) would cede the conduct of his most important policy to a Congressionally-chartered group, even (or especially) one co-chaired by a Bush family intimate. The Iraq Study Group's case was undermined not only by its large number of questionable recommendations but also the weakness of its central proposal to launch diplomatic exercises that could never compensate for military failure. Its bipartisan cover would end in Spring 2008 and was predicated on a change of military mission. In any event, the new Congressional Democratic leadership wanted a quicker U.S. military departure, arguing that the United States should get out of a civil war. But the President could not reject something with nothing. Baker-Hamilton had reinforced the view that "stay the course" meant a devastating defeat. Even as the Study Group ended, Bush launched his own series of studies at the NSC, State, and DOD.

All of these developments compelled an unusual presidential soul-searching. The most important sign of impending change had already occurred. On November 7, 2006, the day after the election "thumping," Bush had accepted the resignation of the war's architect, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, who admitted that his Iraq strategy had not produced enough progress quickly enough. His successor, the former CIA Director Robert Gates, another veteran from Bush's father's administration, told the Congress, "We're not winning and we're not losing," a fatal verdict in counterinsurgency, where stalemate means attrition and attrition wears out the foreigners' welcome and patience.

This change of the guard, and the Baker-Hamilton Study Group's misfire bought Bush a month. On January 10, 2007, he confirmed in a national address what had been leaking out of Washington for a fortnight, that the current strategy had failed and a new one was necessary. But it would be the opposite of the Study Group's main recommendations, the demands of the Democrats, and the direction of the polls.

Bush focused on the battle for Baghdad (and Anbar province), committing an additional 21,500 forces to a combined combat and training role that, in cooperation with the Iraqis, might subdue the city. (Four thousand of them would reinforce an effort to pacify the rebellious Sunni Anbar province to the west.) Unlike earlier occasions, this time there would be sufficient U.S. troops and no "political or sectarian interference" in operations. The President quoted Maliki's promise that the new security plan "will not provide a safe haven for any outlaws regardless of sectarian or political affiliation." Bush stated bluntly that "America's commitment is not open ended," warning Maliki that failure to follow through on such items as oil revenue sharing and infrastructure spending would "lose the support of the American people" and the Iraqis themselves.

The President also addressed larger regional issues. There would be diplomatic initiative to re-ignite the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Instead of new overtures to Damascus and Tehran, however, "we will interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria."

Finally, in a bow to bipartisanship, Bush announced that he would support Senator Joseph Lieberman in forming a Congressional group "that will bring us together to win the war on terror." Its first project: increasing the size of active Army and Marine Corps, and enlarging the civilian corps available for use in nation-building. All of this new effort plus more money would be needed to wage the "decisive ideological struggle of our time."

THE ENDGAME

The Study Group, the Democrats, and the opinion polls had all advocated an American "step back" from Iraq. In contrast, Bush decided to "step forward," necessary, he argued, so that the United States could "step back" at a later date, once Iraq seemed safely on the path to self-government and (mostly) self-defense. As new policies required new men, the President promptly announced replacements on the diplomatic and military levels. Most important was the ascension of General David Petraeus, a two-tour combat veteran and the Army's votary of counterinsurgency.

Bush's new tack was intended to focus U.S. military and political efforts on the "three P's" and the "three C's," centered on Baghdad. But at this late date, could counterinsurgency work? And would the new resources suffice?

The road ahead is uphill on all fronts. These are the critical issues:

(1) **Surge, Plus Up or Tumble Down?** The size and duration of actual American reinforcements remains to be seen. Some new troops have arrived but the surge, as some call it, or the "plus up" as DOD describes it, also depends on rotation, logistics, and the change of command. Those whose power may be curtailed by the American plans will have every incentive to go for maximum gain now, a reason to expect a "plus up" of sectarian violence before the United States can bring the new policy to bear.

(2) **A New Iraqi Government?** Doubts multiply whether the Maliki government can, in fact, do its part, especially if this requires a drastic reduction of Sadr's power on the ground. Bush has warned publicly and privately that Maliki must do serious co-option with the Sunnis, including the sharing of oil revenue. He consulted ostentatiously with Sadr's mortal enemy, al Hakim, head of the SCIRI movement, among whose leading officials a replacement for Maliki might be found. Should Maliki fail, the United States would have to engineer a new government and very quickly, a tricky task even in better times.

(3) **Regional Support?** Secretary of State Rice's efforts to restart, at least motion, if not movement, on the Israeli-Palestinian front gives cover to Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf Emirates to help in Iraq. The creation of an anti-Iranian bloc, however, will also test whether its members can free Lebanon and the Palestinians of Syrian and Iranian vetoes. Moreover, all the regional powers will be assessing the success or failure of the new U.S. effort in Baghdad. And all the Middle East governments are adept at hedging bets.

(4) **Co-option at Home?** Bush will face serious attempts by the Democrats and some Republicans to thwart his plans through political opposition and budget maneuvers. On the President's side, Senator McCain has risked his political future by endorsing a plan that falls short of the troop levels he sought. Senator Lieberman, a newly elected independent who owes little to the Democrats, offers Bush a critical swing vote in the Senate but may not be able to rally many others. The Democrats, however, risk the "cut and run" charge should they go too far in trying to hobble the Commander-in-Chief's prerogatives. Senator Clinton's attempt to justify a step down in Iraq so that the United States can step up in Afghanistan attempts to avoid this dilemma by arguing that Democrats can wage the War on Terror more effectively where it counts.

There is not much time for all of this to play out, and the "endgame" will be defined by Fall 2007. The President faces three maximum danger points:

(1) Now, before the plan is put into effect, U.S. troops may not have clear orders. An organized attempt by the Shiites, with Maliki's consent if not participation, to drive the Sunnis out of Baghdad while the United States stands by, would collapse not only the plan but also severely injure American relations with the Sunni powers.

(2) Ninety Days Hence, if the Maliki government is clearly unable or unwilling to deliver its part of the bargain necessitating its replacement without collapsing the entire political system in the process. Bush will also be facing the more serious Congressional attempts to limit his operational authority through budget tactics, against which he will need enough support to sustain vetoes.

(3) End of the Summer 2007, when the new military-political campaign must yield clear results in Baghdad (and Anbar) or be accounted too little, too late. The United States should also be wary of false progress, if the Mahdi militias go to ground in the hope of waiting out the Americans.

Finally, a highly important but less noticed aspect of Bush's "end-game" is that he has also ended the first phase of the War on Terror. His endorsement of counterinsurgency, itself a long-term project, his call for larger military and civilian capabilities, and his belated effort at reconstructing a bipartisan basis for the "long war," all signal that this struggle cannot be won on the quick, or the cheap, or with the forces on hand. Part of the verdict on the President, however, has already been registered. Bush committed to do too much with too little, like President Harry Truman before the Korean War. Korea called Truman's bluff and he never recovered politically from the exposure. It fell to his successors to muster support for the long haul. So Iraq has called Bush's bluff. His end-game will soon be out of his hands.

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