



Stand with the Iraqis

(Published in [*Weekly Standard*](#), from the August 29, 2005 issue)

William Kristol

Colaboraciones n° 505

August 22, 2005

On Thursday, August 11, in Crawford, Texas, President Bush met with his foreign policy team. At a press conference afterwards, he strongly reiterated the core elements of his war policy: We're engaged in a global war on terror; the central front of that war is Iraq; we're committed to winning in Iraq, and to defeating the terrorists, and their sponsors, around the world.

The president was asked about pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq. His response was unequivocal: "Pulling the troops out would send a terrible signal to the enemy. Immediate withdrawal would say to the Zarqawis of the world, and the terrorists of the world, and the bombers who take innocent life around the world, you know, the United States is weak; and all we've got to do is intimidate and they'll leave."

A week later, Vice President Cheney spoke to the 73rd National Convention of the Military Order of the Purple Heart. He, too, offered a strong defense

of the core Bush administration understanding of the war on terror: "This is not a war we can win strictly on the defensive. Our only option against these enemies is to find them, to fight them, and to destroy them. . . . Iraq is a critical front in the war on terror, and victory there is critical to the future security of the United States and other free nations. We know this, and the terrorists know it as well."

One sentence, however, stood out like a sore thumb in both the president's and the vice president's remarks: "As Iraqis stand up, we'll stand down," the president said. "And over time, as Iraqi forces stand up, American forces will stand down," repeated the vice president.

Now, it is probably the case that a couple of years from now we will be able responsibly to reduce the number of American forces in Iraq. But the "stand up/stand down" formulation goes be-

yond that. It suggests--and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld has repeatedly elaborated on this thought--that as Iraqi soldiers get trained, they will replace Americans, apparently regardless of our progress toward victory in the war.

But this formulation--and this policy, if it becomes policy--is, to quote the president, "a terrible signal" to send to the enemy. The enemy should confront the unpleasant prospect of soon facing the current level of American forces supplemented by an ever-growing number of Iraqi fighters. Our enemies should not have the impression that, by continuing the terror, they can secure the reward of facing (inevitably) less-able Iraqi forces in place of American troops.

This formulation, and this policy, is also a terrible signal to send to our friends. It suggests we want to get out more than we want to win. Such a suggestion will itself make winning more difficult--for who will risk committing to a side that seems uncertain about its own commitment, and that seems to be seeking an exit from the struggle?

The right formulation, and the right policy, would be this: As Iraqis stand up, we will stand with them. This formulation is consistent with the Bush administration's general approach to the war on terror. And, as Frederick W. Kagan pointed out last week in the Washington Post, the policy implied by such a commitment--supplementing the current American forces with a couple hundred thousand Iraqi light infantry--would point the way to victory.

For one thing, there are areas like logistics, artillery, and airpower where Iraqi forces cannot substitute for U.S. forces. But, more important, a combined U.S.-Iraqi force doubled in size could fight a more effective and more comprehensive counterinsurgency. We could sweep areas and hold them, instead of sweeping and leaving. We could patrol areas we control--and still launch attacks in areas we don't. We could address problems on the Syrian border--and still concentrate troops in Baghdad. We could do a better job of protecting Iraq's oil infrastructure, and could provide a better security shield behind which real and lasting economic reconstruction could take place. But all of this is possible only if we stay and fight side-by-side with the Iraqis.

Kagan concludes that, in general, "Iraqis will be dependent on significant levels of U.S. military support for years to come." But the good news is that a combined Iraqi-U.S. force will be able to defeat the terrorists. Conversely, as Kagan puts it, "A decision to reduce forces based mainly on the number of Iraq light infantry available at any moment would be dangerous and unwarranted. It might well put at risk the success of U.S. efforts, and the millions of Iraqis working in perilous conditions to establish democracy in their country." And it would put at risk victory in Iraq--our victory in Iraq, the central front in the war on terror--our war on terror. Even talking about "standing down" as the Iraqis stand up makes success more difficult. A commitment to stand with the Iraqis, on the other hand, offers the prospect of victory.