



The Goal is Victory

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Oh, yeah. Victory. Almost forgot about that one.

Only time and continued effort will tell whether President Bush can retake the high ground in the debate over the Iraq war, but reminding Americans of the value of victory is an excellent way to seize the initiative. In his speech yesterday at the Naval Academy, the president began to change the subject from withdrawal to winning. It's about time.

And the complementary release of the "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq" helps flesh out the path to success in greater detail than was possible in the speech. After so many stumbles over so many months, it is at last possible to have some confidence that the administration is on the right strategic

track. The security strategy of "clear, hold, and build" is classic counterinsurgency doctrine. About time we got around to that, too.

The "Victory" document details a security strategy of six parts:

(1) The enemy "can win only if we surrender." That is, the military equation in Iraq is lopsided in our favor; the enemy has neither the manpower or firepower even to take on today's Iraqi army in a fight of any significant size or duration, let alone U.S. or British forces. Yes, the "insurgents" can explode roadside bombs or drive suicide cars into crowds, but the object of the terror campaign is purely political, and its primary target is American public opinion.

(2) American forces need to stay in Iraq until the mission is complete. The drawdown of U.S. forces coming next year should not be confused with withdrawal. The Army and Marines need a rest, and Iraqi troops will take on a larger role, but victory lies in a continuing coalition of the two forces that matter most: Americans and Iraqis.

(3) Political progress will help shape the battlefield. As Iraqis are compelled to make a choice about their future, it will be easier to distinguish good guys from bad guys, "those who can be won over to support the new Iraqi state from the terrorists and insurgents who must either be killed or captured."

(4) Building a stable Iraqi state means "training, equipping and mentoring" Iraqi security forces, both army and police.

(5) There's no separating conditions inside Iraq from conditions in the region. Victory means that "regional meddling and infiltrations can be contained and/or neutralized." Syria, this means you. You too, Iran.

(6) Iraqis must embrace their new freedom and fight for it. We can "help, assist, and train," but ultimately the victory is theirs to be won.

This is an essentially sound strategy, and there are two keys to realizing it. First, the U.S. military must stick with its new-found tactical approach meant to control territory rather than seek out enemy forces. Again, a more serious counterinsurgency strategy might have done this sooner, but weaning the American military--and the civilian leadership of the Penta-

gon--from its fixation on battle rather than war and its disdain for "boots on the ground" has not been easy. We have been "clearing" the enemy out of Iraq, sweeping through but rarely staying, since the initial invasion, but only lately have we taken to "holding" ground in the Sunni regions where the counterinsurgency contest is centered. It's never too late to start doing the right thing. The "victory strategy" is worth quoting at some length:

During much of 2004, major parts of Iraq and important urban centers were no-go areas for Iraqi and Coalition forces. Fallujah, Najaf and Samara were under enemy control. Today, these cities are under Iraqi government control, and the political process is taking hold. Outside of major urban areas, Iraqi and Coalition forces are clearing out hard core enemy elements, maintaining a security presence, and building local institutions to advance local construct and civil society.

Please let it be so.

The second crucial element is, of course, creating Iraqi security forces that give substance to the dream of a new government in Baghdad. For all the empty promises of the past, the president's speech makes it clear that the administration is at last taking this effort seriously, even though the president continues to link "standing up" Iraqi forces so that American forces can "stand down." Again, the purpose of making an Iraqi state is not so we can leave, but so we can continue the work of creating a greater Middle East that we can live with, whose repression does not become terrorist violence.

PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANTLY, Bush stressed that building a competent Iraqi army cannot be rushed. One of the reasons that the process of creating an Afghan National Army has been a success is that it's being done with patience, and the ANA has never been allowed to lose a confrontation with a potentially hostile force. The initial battle of Falluja was a greater catastrophe for the Iraqi army than it was for U.S. forces.

Indeed, one of the most misleading bits of recent conventional wisdom has been that the Iraqi army doesn't need to be as good as the U.S. Army. Indeed, very few ground forces are, so that's an unrealistic standard. But the Iraqi army needs to be very disciplined: The challenges of counterinsurgency war are no less for Iraqis than they are for Americans. Distinguishing friend from foe or civilian from combatant in a split second, in the midst of chaos, in an ambush--

choosing at the right moment to fire or to hold fire when every action might be captured on television--asks a lot of a young soldier. Like the Marines, the Iraqi army needs some "strategic corporals."

It is also clear from the president's speech that the quality of Iraqi army training has been vastly improved since the early days. Much more impressive than Bush's recitation of the total numbers of soldiers and units was the affirmation that there is "an increased focus on leadership training, with professional development courses for Iraqi squad leaders and platoon sergeants and warrant officers and sergeants major." Given that counterinsurgencies are small-unit wars, this sharpened focus is 20-20.

And given the administration's initially fuzzy approach to this war, let us pray that it is finally seeing things more clearly.

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