



## The Hard Way Out

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Some months ago, former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was explaining to a senior Bush administration official his plan for a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq over 12 months, in consultation with the Iraqis. "We're going to do the same thing," the senior official confided, "but we're going to call it victory."

This week it became official: The Bush administration's Iraq policy is no longer "stay the course" but, in the phrase of White House spokesman Tony Snow, "a study in constant motion." The reality, as near as I can tell, is that the administration isn't sure yet where to move after the November elections. Nor are most of the administration's critics. Major newspapers carried editorials or op-eds this week advocating some version of "change the course,"

but they were vaporous when it came to details.

So what are the right guideposts for a gradual American withdrawal from Iraq? How can the United States, in its search for an exit, avoid compounding the mistakes it made in invading Iraq? To help light the way, we are blessed with a *deus ex machina* in the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, headed by former secretary of state James A. Baker III and ex-congressman Lee Hamilton.

A starting point is to understand what the United States is actually doing in Iraq now. A strategy of phased withdrawal is already underway -- on paper. The latest affirmation was yesterday's proposal by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and Gen. George Casey of a security timetable to transfer control to the

Iraqis in 12 to 18 months. The plan envisions a "national compact" among Iraq's different factions. By the end of this year, they would agree on terms for demobilizing militias, sharing oil revenue and easing de-Baathification rules. It all looks sensible -- on paper.

The problem is that this approach hasn't been working. Since January Khalilzad has been prodding Iraqi leaders in the Green Zone to make precisely these compromises. But out in the real world, the hopes for reconciliation have fallen apart, for a simple but terrifying reason: Iraq's Sunnis and Shiites are so enraged that they have stopped believing compromise is possible.

How will withdrawal plans deal with the reality of this sectarian hatred? The administration's answer has been to try to build up the Iraqi military so it can impose a monopoly of force. But that hasn't been working, either. The Iraqi troops simply can't match the brutality of the insurgents and death squads. The U.S. military can do the job, but the cost in American lives is becoming unacceptable. If we are serious about a withdrawal timetable, we will have to accept Iraqi solutions, ragged and violent though they may be.

In the weeks after the election, the debate in Washington will focus on two promising exit ramps. But it's important not to attach unrealistic hopes to either one.

The first path is a more federal Iraq - with power devolved to the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish regions. But this

presupposes a national government strong enough to formulate rules for, say, the sharing of oil revenue. If such a national framework existed, Iraq wouldn't be such a mess in the first place. Another tricky problem is stabilizing the Sunni areas that would be a potential safe haven for terrorists. If the Iraqi army can't control these areas, the only alternative may be, in effect, a Sunni militia drawn from the ranks of the insurgency. U.S. officials have been meeting secretly outside Iraq with insurgent leaders in an effort to draw them into such a framework.

The second exit ramp passes through Iran and Syria. Talking with Tehran and Damascus could be helpful in stabilizing Iraq, but we should recognize at the outset that their influence is limited -- and that it may carry an unacceptable price. Iran's goal in Iraq is a decisive Shiite victory and Sunni submission, but that's a formula for continuing civil war -- and in any event, it's not an agenda the United States should endorse. Syria could be helpful in curbing al-Qaeda in Iraq, but there are limits and drawbacks to Syrian power -- as was clear during its long and brutal occupation of Lebanon.

The real opportunity presented by the Baker-Hamilton process is that it's bipartisan. To get most American troops out of Iraq over the next year will require more patience at home, and a lot less partisan bickering. And our politicians will need strong stomachs: They must manage an orderly retreat under fire. There is a path out of this mess, but we will be lying if we call it victory.