



Bush's Iraq Legacy. What kind of Iraq will he bequeath to his successor?

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Robert Kagan and William Kristol

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President Bush has a little over two years left in office. The central question facing him is this: What kind of Iraq will he bequeath to his successor? Will it be an Iraq in a state of collapse, a horrible and metastasizing mess dumped on the doorstep of the next president? Or an Iraq on a path toward stability and success—with increasing security for Iraqi citizens, an increasingly viable political system, and a developing economy? The answer will determine how this president should be remembered by future generations.

There are, of course, other grave issues at stake that will consume the Bush administration over the next two years: the continuing need to defend Americans from the threat of terrorist attack; Iran's efforts to ac-

quire nuclear weapons; the containment, deterrence, and weakening of a nuclear-armed North Korea; the problems posed by an authoritarian and increasingly belligerent Russia; and the manifold challenges posed by a rising China. But the fact remains that Bush (correctly, in our view) took the nation to war to remove Saddam Hussein, and the success or failure of that war will be central to his legacy.

The current trajectory is downward toward failure. Indeed, this has been the trajectory for over three years, ever since Pentagon officials, civilian and military, decided to put far too few troops in Iraq; too few to bring order and stability to the country after Saddam's ouster; too few to prevent the growth of an in-

surgency; and then too few to put it down. At every stage in the ensuing downward spiral, senior Pentagon officials, with the approval not just of the secretary of defense but of two national security advisers and the president himself, have refused to increase American forces in Iraq to the levels necessary for success. On the contrary, they have always had one foot out the door. Pentagon military and civilian officials have been trying to exit Iraq ever since the military entered it.

On May 3, 2003--less than a month after U.S. troops entered Baghdad--the *New York Times* reported the Pentagon's plans to "withdraw most United States combat forces from Iraq over the next several months," reducing the number of troops from 130,000 to 30,000 by the fall of 2003. In every year that followed, military planners hoped to undertake a substantial draw-down of forces in response to hoped-for and much anticipated political developments in Iraq. And every time, those anticipated political developments foundered on the inability of combined coalition and Iraqi forces to provide the basic security necessary to make political progress possible. So the Pentagon kept enough troops in Iraq to avert immediate disaster, and also to prolong the conflict, but not enough to make progress and avert the prospect of eventual disaster.

The result has not only been a consistently inadequate level of forces. The endless cycle of promised draw-downs, followed by deteriorating security, and then a cancellation of the proposed draw-downs has been

politically disastrous both in Iraq and in the United States. In Iraq, American policies have steadily undermined the Iraqi people's confidence that the United States has either the will or capacity to provide them the security they need and deserve. So they have turned to their own sectarian armed groups for the protection the Bush administration has failed to provide. That, and not historical inevitability or the alleged failings of the Iraqi people, is what has brought Iraq closer to civil war.

In the United States, these policies have been equally damaging. The American people have rightly judged that the administration is floundering in Iraq and, worse, is not committed to doing what is necessary to succeed. This perception undoubtedly played a large part in last week's election. Now, as a result of three years of failed policy, many Americans, including many one-time supporters of the war, have decided that success is no longer possible and it is time to get out.

Many are looking to the Iraq Study Group, the commission headed by James Baker and Lee Hamilton, to provide a face-saving, bipartisan way for the United States to withdraw from Iraq as quickly as possible, with a clear conscience and a decent interval before the full and disastrous consequences of that withdrawal manifest themselves. Most expect the commission's report will provide intellectual cover for retreat, offering elaborate explanations of how the departure of American troops will actually improve the prospects for a political settle-

ment in Iraq.

The great irony, of course, is that while the Baker commission's anticipated report has been hailed as offering a long-overdue change of course, it seems unlikely to do so. The commission's supporters trumpet the idea that there can be no military solution in Iraq, only a political solution, as if Pentagon officials have not been making the same point for three years. The commission may call for more intensive negotiations among Iraqis aimed at establishing some new political *modus vivendi*, as if American diplomats in Baghdad have not been desperately promoting such negotiations for years. The commission may argue that our goal in Iraq should be stability rather than democracy, as if the administration would not long ago have settled for stability if it could have found a way of achieving it.

With nothing new to offer, the Baker commission's report--if it takes the shape most observers predict--will probably suffer the same fate as similar efforts have in the past. It doesn't matter how clever or how "realistic" the political proposals drawn up in Washington may be: Unless the majority of Iraqi people can be protected from terrorist bombers, insurgents, and death squads, they will not be able to negotiate and sustain any political solution. If the United States and Iraqi government forces cannot provide them security, they will increasingly look to their own sectarian forces to provide what security they can.

There is a popular theory these days that the pressure of an American withdrawal will force Iraqis to reach some kind of accommodation with one another. This would be more plausible had it not already been disproved by three years of painful experience. The United States has been promising to withdraw from Iraq since the beginning of the war, and the only result has been to drive Iraqis closer and closer to sectarian conflict. If we wanted to try something truly novel, we would tell Iraqis that the United States did not intend to withdraw until the insurgency was defeated and the sectarian militias were disarmed. It is precisely the illusion that a political solution is possible in the midst of increasingly rampant violence that has gotten us where we are today. Yet this is the illusion the Baker commission may try to sell once again.

There is no getting around the fact that under present conditions, an American military withdrawal, even if undertaken gradually, will bring about the rapid collapse of Iraq. These days one gets the impression that many Americans are sanguine about this possibility. Some seem to believe that things are already as bad as they can get in Iraq. This is willful self-deception. Were the United States to withdraw from Iraq prematurely, the sectarian violence we are seeing today would seem minor compared to the bloodshed of a genuine civil war. There would be no decent interval, no moment when the Iraqi people peacefully separated themselves into their respective sectarian quarters. They

would battle for control of cities and towns and resources across most of the country. The result would be real, bloody ethnic cleansing--of the kind that the United States twice intervened in the Balkans to prevent, of the kind we failed to prevent in Rwanda, and of the kind we are now shamefully failing to prevent in Sudan. The difference in Iraq would be that this time the United States would be more directly responsible for bringing about this humanitarian nightmare.

If such considerations do not move the cool calculators of America's national interests, consider this: Among the many fruits of an Iraqi collapse could well be the creation of safe havens, perhaps quite extensive ones, for international terrorist groups. We have read some hopeful assessments that the Iraqis themselves will not permit al Qaeda or other terrorist organizations to operate in their midst once American forces leave. That hope strikes us as fanciful. Today, Sunni insurgents work in tandem with Islamic jihadists in their bloody assaults on innocent Shia civilians. In the sectarian violence that would follow a collapse of American policy in Iraq, such cooperation would no doubt continue. And in a chaotic Iraq consumed by civil war, who would take the trouble to ensure that some portions of Iraqi territory do not become little al Qaeda-stans?

What this means is that a failed Iraq would quickly become a base for terrorist operations against the United States and other western nations. The Baker commission may

recommend "redeploying" American forces out of the most contested areas in Iraq, including Baghdad, and stationing them somewhere "over the horizon." But how long would it be before this president or the next had to order those troops back in again to fight the terrorists we would have empowered?

Then there is the matter of foreign intervention. Observers worry today that Iran is too influential in Iraq. This fear is probably overstated. But imagine what would happen were we to depart and Iraq to collapse. Iran would intervene to protect its interests. And so would Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and other near neighbors. The regionalization of the Iraqi morass will make the present situation look comparatively stable.

This multifaceted cataclysm might not come on President Bush's watch. To continue along the present course, albeit in the Baker commission's new rhetorical guise, could buy enough time so that Bush's successor would have to deal with the consequences of his failure, not Bush himself. Maybe that is the gift that the team of Bush 41 is offering to Bush 43, a clever way of passing the buck. But is this president really willing to pass on an Iraq nightmare to his successor? Is that the historical legacy he plans to settle for in his remaining two years in office?

Instead of looking for a graceful and face-saving way to lose in Iraq, the president could finally demand of his civilian and military advisers a strategy to succeed. Such a strategy

would do what previous strategies have not done: provide the number of American forces necessary to achieve even minimal political objectives in Iraq. Such an effort would begin by increasing American force levels in Iraq by at least 50,000.

The objective of this increased force would be to do what has not been done since the beginning of the war: to clear and hold Baghdad, without shifting troops from other contested areas of Iraq. As our colleague, military expert Frederick Kagan, [has argued](#)--and sources inside the U.S. military have confirmed--an additional 50,000 troops could secure the Iraqi capital. Once that is accomplished, clear and hold operations could expand outward toward the areas of the Sunni insurgency. This strategy would not pacify and stabilize all of Iraq in one year or perhaps even two. But it could secure and stabilize the vital center of that country, and provide real hope for progress--hope to Iraqis as well as to Americans. At least the president would be able to hand off an Iraq that had some prospect of success instead of one heading inexorably toward disaster.

Those who claim that it is impossible to send 50,000 more troops to Iraq, because the troops don't exist, are wrong. The troops do exist. But it is also true that the Army and Marines are stretched, and that this new deployment needs to be accompanied by rapid steps to increase the overall size of American ground forces. For six years, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld refused to acknowledge that his vi-

sion of the American military of the future did not match the present reality of American military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan and around the world. We trust the new secretary of defense will understand the necessity of dealing urgently with the manpower crisis in our military.

If the president finally undertook to send the necessary number of troops to Iraq, we have no doubt that many of the recommendations likely to come from the Baker commission would make sense and could be supported. We share the commission's belief that the administration should actively seek bipartisan support for its approach to Iraq. It always could have done more in this regard. And we believe that leading Democrats could support an increase of troop levels in Iraq with the aim of stabilizing the situation. Those Democrats who hope to be elected president in 2008 should welcome any effort to ensure that they are not left to deal with a collapsing Iraq should they enter the White House.

There is a lot of easy talk of how a victory strategy in Iraq has been rendered impossible by Tuesday's elections. This is nonsense. First of all, victory in Iraq is a national priority, and to abandon it because of a loss of House and Senate seats would be irresponsible. But it is also the case that the loss of seats was in great measure due to a lack of confidence that Bush had a strategy for victory in Iraq, not a belief that he wasn't exiting fast enough. If the president makes clear that he is se-

rious about victory, and has a strategy for attaining it, he will have the support he needs in order to do what is necessary to turn things around in Iraq.

As for the Baker commission's likely recommendation that the United States should engage Syria and Iran in the search for solutions in Iraq, we are skeptical that those countries will want to be helpful. But it is one thing to seek their help while we are losing and withdrawing, when our negotiating position is at its weakest, and quite another to engage in such diplomacy while we increase our force levels and try to improve the security situation. If people are serious about negotiating with the likes of Syria and Iran, they should want our diplomats to go in with as strong a hand as possible.

Finally, as others have pointed out, if the Iraqis choose to organize their country in a less "unified" and more "federated" way, that is fine--as long as it is peaceful and stable. A peaceful and stable federated Iraq will, however, require no less of a commitment of U.S. troops to provide security than a unitary one. As for our support for democratic governance in Iraq, that has been as much

practical as moral. We have yet to hear how the imposition of a dictatorship in Iraq would solve the problem, or even be possible. Would a new, U.S.-approved strongman be Sunni or Shia? If one or the other, how would he exercise control over the country and with what army? The thing about a strongman is that he has to be strong. But it is precisely the conundrum of Iraq that no one and no group of people is strong enough to impose their will. That is why consensus is necessary among the different groups, and why some representation of the people's desires is necessary within them. But whatever political solution one favors, they all depend on achieving a minimum level of order and security in Iraq, and that is something that only American forces have any chance of providing.

The president has two years to turn things around and leave a viable Iraq to the next president. It should be obvious that "staying the course" is a recipe for failure. So are politically driven exit strategies. The president is left with the choice: quit, or do what is necessary to succeed. We trust the president understands that the task before him in Iraq is to find a strategy for success.