



**America's Responsibility:
Should the administration place all its bets on being able
to find tens of thousands of foreign forces to fill
the dangerous gap in Iraq?**

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Es común encontrar referencias en los medios de comunicación españoles al peso de la escuela neo-conservadora en el diseño de las políticas exterior y de defensa norteamericana, así como adjudicar a políticos como Dick Cheney o Donald Rumsfeld la condición de neo-conservadores o de aliados políticos de este grupo. El texto siguiente puede resultar clarificador para entender la posición neoconservadora sobre el papel de Estados Unidos en Iraq así como las importantes diferencias que les separan del Secretario de Defensa.

Desperation breeds illusions. The latest illusion, embraced reluctantly by the Bush administration and enthusiastically by its critics, is that the burden of establishing and maintaining security in Iraq can be substantially shifted off American shoulders and onto someone else's--whether it be the United Nations, Turkey, India, or the poor Iraqi people themselves. In principle, there is nothing wrong with trying to shift control back to the Iraqis. That should be our goal. Nor would any reasonable person deny that international assistance is essential

to rebuilding Iraq. But what we are witnessing today is neither prudent multilateralism nor the normal, gradual process of turning power over to Iraqis that we all expected to occur over time. On both the international and Iraqi fronts, the administration's actions are being driven by the realization that there are too few American troops in Iraq.

At least the administration has begun dropping the pretense that everything is under control in Iraq and that the civilian authority has the resources and the field commanders the troops that they need. Last week the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, Lt. General Ricardo Sanchez, admitted that his forces could not handle any new eruption of conflict in Iraq should one occur. "If a militia or an internal conflict of some nature were to erupt," Gen. Sanchez told reporters in Baghdad, ". . . that would be a challenge out there that I do not have sufficient forces for." So when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld says the United States has enough forces on the ground in Iraq, what he means is that we have enough so long as nothing untoward happens. But even that may be inaccurate. General Sanchez went on to acknowledge, as the Associated Press reported, that "the coalition lacks sufficient troops to protect Iraq's porous borders or its thousands of miles of highways." This is a special problem inasmuch as the main "security challenges" Sanchez sees "looming in the future" include the infiltration of al Qaeda and other foreign forces across those porous borders and along those highways.

It's not surprising, therefore, that the American officials most eager for a U.N. resolution these days are to be found not just in the State Department but also among the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the commanders of U.S. forces in Iraq. Secretary of State Powell's aides spun the press about their boss's big victory over Rumsfeld, thus perpetuating the petty personal feuds that plague this administration even during times of crisis. But in fact the administration's new push for U.N. backing is not a victory for the multilateralist spirit Powell allegedly harbors. It is a simple matter of an unwillingness by America's leaders to shoulder the necessary military burden.

But the bad news for the U.S. military, and for all those out there who would like to see us shift some of the burden of the Iraqi occupation to the U.N. over the next few months, is that we aren't likely to get more troops from the international community. It's a good bet France will strike a hard bargain before agreeing to any resolution acceptable to the administration--if it ever does. But even if a new resolution passes, don't expect a big influx of foreign forces. The Europeans have few, if any, troops to spare. India and Turkey, who are the real targets of the administration's diplomatic efforts, show every sign of not wanting to play. The Turkish government will apparently not even put the issue to a vote before October, and Turkish public opinion remains hostile to any deployment in Iraq. Nor should one have high hopes for India, where public opinion is also hostile and the government wary. After all, what country would want to rush

troops into Iraq now when even the Americans have been unable to create a secure environment?

Never mind whether it is desirable to replace American troops with forces from Poland and Thailand and Mongolia in such sensitive places as Najaf. After the August 29 car bombing that killed the prominent Shia cleric Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim, the U.S. Marines decided to extend their stay in Najaf another two weeks. Two weeks? Will things be back to normal in Najaf in two weeks? Then there are other problems. As Reuel Marc Gerecht points out elsewhere in this issue, there is a real question whether non-American forces, and particularly Muslim forces from Turkey and Pakistan, will make the situation in Iraq better or worse. This week the newly appointed Iraqi foreign minister said he was not happy about the idea of Turkish troops in Iraq. There's symmetry to that, because the Turks aren't happy about the idea either.

In short, it is foolish--and we believe irresponsible--for the administration to place all its bets on being able to find tens of thousands of foreign forces to fill the dangerous gap in Iraq in the coming months. We have nothing in principle against seeking a new U.N. resolution, or in further "internationalizing" the occupation of Iraq, if that will help bring security to the country. But the fact is that, at the end of two months of U.N. diplomacy, the United States is unlikely to have found real help. And then what will the administration do?

The same desperation is driving the administration to accelerate its efforts to turn over responsibility for maintaining security in Iraq to Iraqis. Obviously this ought to be the goal, and the sooner the better. But there are real questions about how quickly a reliable Iraqi force can be put in place. The original plan was to take more than a year to stand up an Iraqi army, and more than a year to train an Iraqi police force to reasonable standards. Now that's all being accelerated. Why? Not because the administration is suddenly eager to put an Iraqi face on security. Not because it's been determined that Iraqis don't need that much training after all. No, the accelerated timetable is due entirely to the fact that security problems are proliferating, and the U.S. forces in place are insufficient to deal with the mounting crisis. But premature overreliance on Iraqi forces is a bad substitute for adequate U.S. forces. General Sanchez admits that a serious Iraqi force won't be ready for several months. That's probably optimistic.

And there's another problem. In the interest of finding capable Iraqis, the administration has apparently been turning increasingly to former employees of Saddam Hussein's elite military and security forces. According to the Washington Post's Daniel Williams, "The need to quickly find skilled fighters and intelligence agents . . . has forced the Americans to dip into the ranks of units closely associated with Hussein." Most worrying if true is the fact that the new Interior Ministry's domestic intelligence network will, according to the Post, be "made up largely of secret police and intelligence agents from the ousted government." Administration officials say all recruits are "screened" to insure their loyalty to

the new regime and their friendliness toward the United States. But as one Iraqi official commented, "Their ties may be difficult to break." And it only takes one or two mistakes in the vetting process to cause a catastrophe. Already American officials in Baghdad are investigating the possibility that the car bombing of police headquarters there may have involved Baathists within the new Iraqi security forces. Similar suspicions swirl around the bombing of the U.N. headquarters.

Plainly, there are no easy answers to the problems we face in Iraq right now. The American military is too small, thanks to a decade-and-a-half's irresponsible cutbacks, under Republican and Democratic administrations alike. The administration seems to find it difficult to admit that more troops are needed, in Iraq and in the armed forces generally. But every day, the reality of our predicament becomes harder to paper over. The difficult straits in which we find ourselves will become painfully apparent when the administration's pleas for help at the U.N. prove unavailing. We trust that before that moment arrives, the White House will make the hard decision to put in the U.S. troops necessary to do the job. Though it is true that our military is smaller than it should be, there are troops available for Iraq, if we are willing to call on combat elements from the Marines, the National Guard, and Special Forces.

Again, we have no principled objection to involving the United Nations, to seeking more international help, and to giving Iraqis more responsibility for their own country. But in present circumstances, the hasty efforts in this direction have about them an unmistakable air of buck-passing. Here we find the Bush administration and its Democratic critics in altogether too much agreement: It's been four months since the war ended, and already everyone wants to shift the burden of responsibility off America's shoulders and onto someone else's, and the sooner the better. Democrats call for internationalization in Iraq not simply because they like multilateralism but because, as both Howard Dean and John Kerry have said, it will allow us to "bring our boys home." In this formulation, the call for the U.N. to take the lead role in Iraq is really a kind of veiled McGovernism. The administration's push to stand up an Iraqi force ahead of schedule is a thinly veiled attempt to make up for the lack of American forces and the unwillingness to introduce more.

These efforts to shift responsibility onto others--regardless of whether they are ready, able, or willing--are wrong, and will in any case fail. The United States invaded Iraq, and did so for good reasons. It is the responsibility of the United States to build in Iraq a condition of security and stability, moving toward prosperity and democracy. Nor should we forget for a moment that the whole world is watching--especially Arabs and Muslims. Right now, a scant few months after the war, Washington already seems short of breath. This can only encourage our deadly enemies to escalate the pressure.

It is an illusion to imagine that this mess can be handed off to someone else and we can go on about our business. That option does not exist. The choices are stark: Either the United States does what it takes to succeed in Iraq, or we lose in Iraq. And if we lose, we will leave behind us not blue helmets but radicalism and chaos, a haven for terrorists, and a perception of American weakness and lack of resolve in the Middle East and reckless blundering around the world. That is the abyss we may be staring into if we do not shift course now.

We trust the president knows he cannot cut and run in Iraq. It is heartening that he has decided to send a large budget request for Iraq to Congress, though we fear he may actually have asked for too little in reconstruction funds. What we fear more, however, is that no amount of aid will suffice if Iraq remains insecure. The goal of a secure Iraq requires an unapologetic assertion of U.S. responsibility and a redoubling of U.S. effort--not clinging to illusions.

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