



Contracts for Iraq: Reverse the Pentagon's Decision

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President Bush, we suspect, is going to overrule the Pentagon's attempt to exclude from the bidding for Iraq reconstruction contracts certain countries that have opposed U.S. policy in Iraq. He might as well do it sooner rather than later, so as to minimize the diplomatic damage done by the Pentagon's heavy-handed and counterproductive action.

We hold no brief for the Chirac, Schroeder, or Putin governments. We are also very much in favor of finding ways to work more closely with other governments -- such as those of Britain, Spain and Poland -- who have courageously stood with us, and who hold the promise of

continuing to be more helpful to us. We have even been critical of the Bush Administration for a certain lack of imagination in finding ways to work constructively with these friendly governments. But this particular effort by the Pentagon to reward friends and punish enemies is stupid, and should be abandoned.

A deviously smart American administration would have quietly distributed contracts for rebuilding Iraq as it saw fit, without any announced policy of discrimination. At the end of the day, it would be clear that opponents of American policy didn't fare too well in the bidding process. Message delivered, but with a certain subtlety.

A more clever American administration would have thrown a contract or two to a couple of those opponents, to a German firm, for instance, as a way of wooing at least the business sectors in a country where many businessmen do want to strengthen ties with the United States.

A truly wise American administration would have opened the bidding to all comers, regardless of their opposition to the war -- as a way of buying those countries into the Iraq effort, building a little goodwill for the future, and demonstrating to the world a little magnanimity.

But instead of being smart, clever, or

magnanimous, the Bush Administration has done a dumb thing. The announcement of a policy of discriminating against French, German, and Russian firms has made credible European charges of vindictive pettiness and general disregard for the opinion of even fellow liberal democracies. More important, it has made former Secretary of State James Baker's very important effort to get these countries, among others, to offer debt relief for the new government of Iraq almost impossible. This is to say nothing of other areas where we need to work with these governments.

This decision is a blunder. We trust it will be reversed.



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