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President Bush's New Way Forward in Iraq

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Last night, President Bush laid out his Administration's plans for a revised U.S. Iraq policy that combines stepped-up U.S. and Iraqi military efforts with increased Iraqi attempts to reach a national reconciliation, an enhanced and decentralized U.S. economic aid effort to reward political moderation and create jobs, and regional diplomacy to line up greater international support for Iraq's beleaguered government. The plan's success will depend on the ability of Iraq's young government to deliver on its promises to achieve a lasting national reconciliation to undermine the Sunni-dominated insurgency and break the momentum toward an accelerating civil war. President Bush believes that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government is up to the task. This is a calculated gamble, but it is far more likely to advance U.S. interests than the policy advocated by most of its detractors—an immediate withdrawal—which would lead to inevitable catastrophe.

New Surge, New Strategy

Much discussion leading up to the speech focused on the proposed surge of U.S. troops, which the President announced will total 21,500 troops in addition to the approximately 132,000 troops already deployed in Iraq. The surge force will include five combat brigades (17,500 troops) to be deployed in Baghdad and 4,000 Marines to be deployed in restive Anbar province, an insurgent stronghold. But force levels alone are not a strategy. More important than the numbers are the new strategy to be executed by the additional troops and the interweaving of the military effort with a

broader political strategy to reconcile Iraq's warring factions and suffocate the insurgency.

The critical issue is how the proposed surge will advance U.S. interests. It could do this in three ways: weakening the insurgency; helping establish credible and effective Iraqi security forces that are responsible to the government and capable of protecting the Iraqi people; and strengthening the Iraqi government by easing sectarian tensions and advancing national reconciliation.

A surge could enhance security in Baghdad, the epicenter of Iraq's political violence. But unless it is accompanied by a sustained surge of Iraqi forces, the security gains would be only temporary. Insurgents and sectarian militias would be driven out of certain areas or go underground but re-emerge after U.S. forces stand down. The Administration's previous "clear, hold, and build" strategy has suffered from a lack of troops—especially Iraqi troops. Too often, American troops have cleared an area of insurgents, only to have it return to insurgent control due to the lack of reliable and effective Iraqi security forces to "hold and build."

Therefore, President Bush's promise that Iraqi forces will take the lead in the new military cam-

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paign is important. Bush also appeared to embrace Prime Minister Maliki's ambitious goal of gaining Iraqi control over security efforts by next November. A long-term surge in the quantity and quality of Iraqi troops is ultimately more important than the proposed surge in American troops. The Maliki government has promised to deploy three additional army brigades to Baghdad, bringing the total to nine. It remains to be seen whether the Iraqi government, which has defaulted on past pledges to mobilize troops for operations in Baghdad, will deliver on its promises this time.

The United States must place the highest priority on equipping, training, and placing embedded advisers in Iraqi army and police units to boost the capabilities of Iraqi security forces. President Bush also announced plans to support Iraq's efforts to expand its army. But the biggest change must be qualitative, not quantitative: raising the fighting morale of those forces. This cannot come from a non-Iraqi source; Iraq's political leadership must form a government that the army and police will be motivated to fight and die for. Too often in the past these government institutions have been perceived to be doing the bidding of sectarian interests rather than working for the Iraqi nation as a whole.

Saddam Hussein's execution dramatically revealed the degree to which sectarian influences have infiltrated and corrupted government institutions. Several of the officials supervising the execution chanted the name of Moktada al-Sadr, the radical Shiite cleric and son of one of Saddam's prominent victims, as the noose was placed around Saddam's neck. This transformed the execution from a sober exercise of justice into an act of sectarian vengeance.

These sectarian influences must be purged from government institutions if Iraq is to survive as a unified state. In particular, sectarian and corrupt personnel must be purged from Iraq's police, Interior Ministry, and the Facilities Protection Service, which have become infiltrated by militias and death squads. The vetting and training of Iraq's police, one of the weakest links in the Iraqi government, urgently requires attention. Advisers should be inserted in active police units, as well as army units, to raise the effectiveness and professionalism of the police, while reducing human rights abuses.

The threat of a sectarian civil war has eclipsed the insurgent threat and will block any chance of creating a stable democracy unless it is decisively averted. This can only be done by Iraqis, as President Bush has recognized. Americans can help build state institutions, but only the Iraqis can build a genuine sense of nationhood.

Benchmarks for Baghdad

Bush's plan puts the burden on Iraqi leaders to defuse growing sectarian tensions by jumpstarting their long-stalled program of national reconciliation. He has ended the prospect of an open-ended American troop commitment by tying his proposed surge to a series of benchmarks that Iraqis must accomplish: deploying more Iraqi troops to Baghdad; setting up a fair process for amending the Iraqi constitution to assuage nervous Sunni Arabs that their rights will be safeguarded against a tyranny of the majority; passing legislation on the distribution of oil revenues to assure each group an equitable share of Iraq's economic wealth; holding provincial elections to empower pragmatic local leaders; and reforming the de-Baathification laws that many Sunnis believe discriminate against them. These benchmarks must be enforced by threatening to reduce the future commitment of American troops and economic aid if they are not implemented. President Bush has pledged to do this.

The Maliki government has apparently signed off on a change of the rules of engagement for American forces that will allow them to seek out and arrest or eliminate members of death squads and militias that undermine the national government. This would be a major change from past experience, when American troops arrested militia leaders for illegal acts and then the Iraqi government quickly released them from jail. The Administration must secure the firm agreement of the Iraqi authorities to take sustained action to contain Shiite militias and prevent them from killing with impunity. In particular, the Mahdi militia of radical cleric Moktada al-Sadr, which has staged two bloody revolts against coalition forces and continues to attack Sunnis as well as rival Shiite movements, must be brought to heel. Continuing current U.S. efforts to suppress Sunni insurgents when al-Sadr's death squads remain free to murder

more Sunnis—building support for the insurgents—makes no sense.

President Bush said last night that Prime Minister Maliki had pledged to take stronger action to curb the militias and make some difficult compromises to attract greater Sunni Arab support for the government. Prime Minister Maliki must be held to this promise.

Bush's strategy also contains a diplomatic effort to increase international support for Iraq's elected government. He focused on obtaining greater support from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf States, all of which have a stake in a stable Iraq. Especially needed is greater Arab support for the Iraqi government in terms of diplomatic recognition and foreign aid. Among Sunni Arab states, only Egypt has sent an ambassador. Washington should press the other Arab states to recognize the Maliki government, send ambassadors to Baghdad, and forgive more than \$40 billion in Iraqi debt. Such measures would strengthen the incentives of the Shiite/Kurdish ruling coalition to include greater numbers of moderate Sunni representatives in a national unity government.

As for Iran and Syria, Bush was not forgiving of their efforts to destabilize Iraq and support attacks on coalition and Iraqi forces: "We will disrupt the attacks on our forces. We'll interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria. And we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq." The President is right that engaging Iran and Syria is not a realistic solution for stabilizing an independent Iraq. Both are opposed to the development of a stable democracy there and are part of the problem, not the solution.

A Calculated Gamble

Bush's plan will not reduce the violence immediately. Rather, it is likely to cause a surge in fighting as U.S. troops and the Iraqi government root out insurgents and death squads. It will entail greater American casualties in the short run but could save many American and Iraqi lives in the long run, if successful. A rapid withdrawal of U.S. troops would run far greater risks of collapsing the Iraqi government, handing Iran and al-Qaeda a major

victory, and abandoning Iraqis to a dismal humanitarian catastrophe. Repeated U.S. military interventions would be required to attack al-Qaeda forces in Iraq for the indefinite future and perhaps to contain a spiraling sectarian bloodbath.

Bush's plan is superior to any plan that is likely to emerge from Congress. Senator Edward Kennedy's proposal to cap U.S. troop strength at current levels, for example, would be self-defeating. Moreover, it would be unconstitutional—according to, among others, the incoming Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Joseph Biden—because it impinges upon the President's powers as commander in chief of the armed forces. Congress, preoccupied with short-term political considerations, does not have the authority or the expertise to micromanage the complex U.S. military campaign in Iraq.

The folly of Congress interfering in the conduct of war goes all the way back to the War for Independence (1775–1781) and the history of how General George Washington was continually vexed by the Continental Congress involving itself in that conflict. The current Congress should learn from this history.

The President admitted that he had been forced by events to alter his policy. Taking personal responsibility for errors made in the past, he said, "Where mistakes have been made, the responsibility rests with me." He also held open the door to greater bipartisanship on foreign policy: "Acting on the good advice of Senator Joe Lieberman and other key members of Congress, we will form a new, bipartisan working group that will help us come together across party lines to win the war on terror." This undertaking would be far more productive than an ongoing barrage of partisan resolutions and political gestures from Congress.

President Bush's new Iraq policy is a calculated gamble. The Administration has invested heavily in buying time and political breathing space for Iraq's fledgling coalition government to rise up above its sectarian roots and build a nation that can govern itself, sustain itself, and protect itself from Saddam's diehard Baathist supporters and radical Islamic terrorists. But the alternative policy advocated by

many opponents of Bush's New Way Forward is far worse: an immediate troop withdrawal that would swiftly lead to a strategic, moral, and humanitarian catastrophe not only for Iraq but for the entire region, as refugees, terrorism, political instability, and sectarian conflict spill over into surrounding countries. Such an outcome would be a dire set-

back for the war against terrorism and efforts to contain Iran for decades to come.

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