



The Surge Has Failed in its Objective

By JESSICA T. MATHEWS

SEPTEMBER 2007

The surge the president of the United States launched last January has failed. By tacitly conceding that there has been no political progress in Iraq since then, Mr. Bush admits as much, but asks for more time. He raises some important fears (and some wildly exaggerated ones) of the consequences of withdrawal. What he has said nothing about are the positive reasons to keep on trying. That is what the upcoming debate must address: more time to achieve what?

The purpose of the surge was an enlarged security force so that, as the president said, over time, “daily life will improve, Iraqis will gain confidence in their leaders, and the government will have the breathing space it needs to make progress.” That progress was to include a raft of fundamental political changes. Al Qaeda was a relatively minor factor. (“As we make these changes, we will continue to pursue al Qaeda.... Al Qaeda is still active in Iraq.”) Until midsummer, the administration insisted that the escalated military effort was not to reduce violence per se, but to reduce it because political reconciliation would follow.

Then, overnight, that linkage disappeared because the political regression of the past nine months could no longer be denied. Instead, partly because the president is framing it this way, and partly because these are the things Americans can sound knowledgeable about, this debate is shaping up to be about half a strategy. The subject will be U.S. troop levels, tactical military developments, and the status of Iraq’s security forces—fanned by fears of Al Qaeda and the regional aftermath of withdrawal.

Yet, supporters of the war and opponents both know that the multiple conflicts in Iraq have no military solution. Soon to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Michael Mullen, is unequivocal on this: “Security is critical to providing the government of Iraq the breathing space it needs to work toward political national reconciliation and economic growth.... *Barring that, no*

amount of troops in no amount of time will make much of a difference” (emphasis added). If U.S. forces cannot make a difference, improved Iraqi forces certainly cannot.

What, then, is the political and economic situation? Moderate Sunnis have left the government, Shia unity has crumbled, and Kurds and Shia are less, not more, willing to share power with the Sunnis. Seventeen of 38 cabinet ministers have walked out. Former Sunni insurgents have turned against Al Qaeda in Iraq in Anbar province, but this does not mean support for the Iraqi government or for U.S. goals. More and more of the Iraqi people look to a source other than the government (a sectarian party or militia, Islamist terrorists, a tribe, a criminal gang) for the security and services the Baghdad government cannot provide. By the Pentagon’s reckoning, unemployment stands at about 60 percent, draining the economic base any government needs to stand on.

Basra, Iraq’s second largest city and not long ago relatively peaceful, is the place where the “clear, hold, and build” strategy the United States is now following was first applied by the British and judged to be the model to follow. Today it is lawless and bloody, in the grip of warring Shia militia and fundamentalist clerics. The International Crisis Group (ICG), whose reporting from Iraq over five years has been among the best, fears that Basra’s fate will be the country’s. The Iraq ICG sees is “a failed state—a country whose institutions and, with them, any semblance of national cohesion, have been obliterated.”

As convenient as it would be to have a scapegoat, Iraq’s political disintegration cannot be blamed on its prime minister, nor fixed by replacing him. Its sources are deeper. Minority Sunnis, who ruled the country for a long time, are still unwilling, as the recent National Intelligence Estimate found, “to accept a diminished political status.” That hasn’t changed in four years and probably will not until they have fought to exhaustion for what they see as their rightful place.

The political disintegration also comes from the momentum of violence. More than 4 million Iraqis are refugees, internally displaced, or dead from violence. In per capita U.S. terms, that would be nearly *50 million* people. Could we, under such conditions, come together as a nation, bury past wrongs, and under foreign military dictate reallocate wealth and make frightening political accommodations? The question answers itself—yet we continue to insist that Iraqis can, perhaps if we threaten a bit more.

What is happening in Iraq is not a war the United States can win or lose. It is the inevitable struggle for power that rushes to fill a political vacuum—this one created by Saddam’s overthrow. Al Qaeda in Iraq exploits the resulting

chaos. But it is a sideshow—an extraordinarily destructive one, but still a sideshow—to the Iraqi political struggle.

Looking at Iraq in its own terms—not through the lens of the U.S. war effort—makes plain that the political strategy the United States has worked toward since 2004, to impose a power-sharing plan and thereby avoid the usual, violent phase of political sorting out, has failed. The choice is not to plow on without an end to our military means or to withdraw immediately. Alternatives have been proposed. Unfortunately, all require a fresh effort inside Iraq and vis-à-vis its neighbors, with slim chances of success. When no course looks attractive, the easiest thing is to keep doing what you are doing in the hope that something will change.

But for Iraq, and therefore for America’s larger strategic interests, buying more time to continue the same strategy can achieve nothing. To do so is to ask American troops to fight to create breathing space for a corpse.

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