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Stay to Win

JOHN MCCAIN

The news from Iraq is filled with numbers. The number of Iraqis streaming to the polls to determine their future democratically. A new constitution, enshrining fundamental rights, approved by a 4-to-1 margin, with two Sunni-dominated provinces dissenting. More than 2,000 Americans killed in action since the war began.

It is all being counted: the number of safe areas, the daily attacks, the Iraqi troop units trained, the billions spent per month. And yet, as has been so often the case in Iraq, these numbers cannot indicate where that country is heading, because the figures themselves point in different directions. There is, at the same time, both great difficulty and great hope. And just as Americans would be unwise to focus solely on the hopeful signs, so too would they be foolish merely to dwell on the difficulties.

I mention this not because I seek to whitewash the situation in Iraq. On the contrary, not all is well there. But as we look on events there, let us not forget that the Iraqi people are in the midst of something unprecedented in their history.

The world has witnessed Iraqis of all stripes exercising those very democratic habits that critics predicted could never take root in a country with little democratic tradition. On December 15, 2005, Iraqis braved death threats to elect their first free and independent parliament. Before that, they voted in January for an interim government. They put Saddam Hussein on trial and dictators throughout the world on notice. They produced a landmark constitution that, while not perfect, nevertheless upholds critical rights that go far beyond standards elsewhere in the region. And they adopted that constitution by free vote—the first time in history for an Arab country. Try as they might, the terrorists

and the insurgents have proved unable to muster a veto against Iraqi democracy.

Despite the daily bombings and attacks, the terrorists have not achieved their goals. They have failed to incite a civil war, because Kurds and Shiites still have faith in the future and in American and Iraqi security efforts. The insurgents have not prevented Iraqis from joining the military and police, in spite of horrific attacks at recruiting centers. Oil exports continue, despite concerted efforts at sabotage. And the insurgents have not stopped the political process, even while they assassinate government officials and attack polling places.

Amid the debate about Iraq, the stakes for the United States, and current American policy, it is important not to forget just how far the Iraqi people have come. With US help, the dictator who ruled their lives is gone from power and the Iraqi people are establishing a true democracy. The Middle East will be forever changed by the choices American policy makers have made, and by the choices they will continue to make over the next months. They must get Iraq right.

TRANSCENDENT STAKES

The United States must get Iraq right because America's stake in that conflict is enormous. All Americans, whether or not they supported the US action to topple Hussein, must understand the profound implications of their country's presence there. Success or failure in Iraq is the transcendent issue for US foreign policy and national security, for now and years to come. And the stakes are higher than in the Vietnam War.

There is an understandable desire, nearly three years after the invasion, to seek a quick and easy end to the intervention in Iraq. We see this in the protests of antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan; we saw it recently in Senator John Kerry's call to withdraw troops whether or not the country is secured. But should America follow these calls, it would face

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consequences of the most serious nature. Because Iraqi forces are not yet capable of carrying out most security operations on their own, great bloodshed would occur if the main enforcer of government authority—coalition troops—drew down prematurely. If the United States were to leave, the most likely result would be full-scale civil war.

When America toppled Saddam Hussein, it incurred a moral duty not to abandon the Iraqi people to terrorists and killers. If the United States withdraws prematurely, risking all-out civil war, it will have done precisely that. I can hardly imagine that any US senator or any other American leader would want his nation to suffer that moral stain.

And yet the implications of premature withdrawal from Iraq are not moral alone; they directly involve America's national security. Instability in Iraq would invite further Syrian and Iranian interference, bolstering the influence of two terror-sponsoring states firmly opposed to US policy in the region. Iraq's neighbors—from Saudi Arabia to Israel to Turkey—would feel their own security eroding, and might be induced to act. This uncertain swirl of events would have a damaging impact on America's ability to promote positive change in the Middle East, to say the least.

Withdrawing before there is a stable and legitimate Iraqi authority would turn Iraq into a failed state in the heart of the Middle East. We have seen a failed state emerge after US disengagement before, and it cost Americans terribly. Before Al Qaeda's attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, terrorists found sanctuary in Afghanistan to train and plan operations with impunity. We know that there are today in Iraq terrorists who are planning attacks against Americans. The United States cannot make this fatal mistake twice.

If America leaves Iraq prematurely, the jihadists will interpret the withdrawal as their great victory against a great power. Osama bin Laden and his followers believe that America is weak, unwilling to suffer casualties in battle. They drew that lesson from Lebanon in the 1980s and Somalia in the 1990s, when US troops hastily withdrew after being attacked. Today they have their sights set squarely on Iraq.

ZAWAHIRI'S PLAN

A recently released letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's lieutenant, to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the

leading terrorist in Iraq, draws out the implications. The Zawahiri letter is predicated on the assumption that the United States will quit Iraq, and that Al Qaeda's real game begins as soon as the United States abandons the country. In his missive, Zawahiri lays out a four-stage plan—including the establishment of a caliphate in Iraq, the extension of a "jihad wave" to the secular countries neighboring Iraq, and renewed confrontation with Israel—none of which shall commence until the completion of stage one: *expel the Americans from Iraq*. Zawahiri observes that the collapse of American power in Vietnam—"and how they ran and left their agents"—suggests that "we must be ready starting now."

The United States cannot let them start, now or ever. America must stay in Iraq until the government there has a fully functioning security apparatus that can keep Zarqawi and his terrorists at bay, and ultimately defeat them. Some

argue that it is America's very presence in Iraq that has created the insurgency; if America ends the occupation, it ends the insurgency. In fact, by ending military operations, the United States

would likely empower the insurgency. Zarqawi and others fight not just against foreign forces but also against the Shiite Muslims, whom they believe to be infidels, and against all elements of the government. Sunni Muslim insurgents attack Kurds, Turkmens, Christians, and other Iraqis not simply to end the US occupation, but to recapture lost Sunni power. As the military analyst Frederick Kagan has written, these Sunnis are not yet persuaded that violence is counterproductive; on the contrary, they believe the insurgency might lead to an improvement in their political situation. There is no reason to think that an American drawdown would extinguish these motivations to fight.

Because it cannot pull out and simply hope for the best, because it cannot withdraw and manage things from afar, because morality and national security compel it, the United States has to see this mission through to completion. Calls for premature withdrawal of American forces represent, I believe, a major step on the road to disaster. Drawdowns must be based on conditions in Iraq, not arbitrary deadlines rooted in domestic American politics.

President Bush and his advisers understand this, and I praise their resolve. They know that the consequences of failure are unacceptable and that the

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benefits of success in Iraq remain profound. And yet at the same time there is an undeniable sense that things are slipping—more violence on the ground, declining domestic support for the war, growing incantations among Americans that there is no end in sight. To build on what has been accomplished, and to win the war in Iraq, the United States needs to make several significant policy changes.

A COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY

The first is to adopt an effective military counterinsurgency strategy. For most of the occupation, US military strategy has been built around trying to secure the entirety of Iraq at the same time. With the Americans' current force structure and the power vacuum that persists in many areas of Iraq, that is not possible today. In their attempt to secure all of Iraq, coalition forces engage in search and destroy operations to root out insurgent strongholds, with the aim of killing as many insurgents as possible. But coalition forces cannot hold the ground indefinitely, and when they move on to fight other battles, the insurgent ranks replenish and the strongholds fill again. US troops must then reenter the same area and refight the same battle.

The example of Tal Afar, a city in northwestern Iraq not far from the Syrian border, is instructive. Coalition forces first fought in Tal Afar in September 2003, when the 101st Airborne Division took the city, then withdrew. Over the next year insurgents streamed back into the area. In September 2004 Stryker brigades and Iraqi security forces returned to Tal Afar, chasing out insurgents. They then left again, moving on to fight insurgents in other locations. Then in September 2005, the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment swept into Tal Afar, killing rebels while others retreated into the countryside. Most US troops have already redeployed, and they may well be back again. The battles of Tal Afar, like those in other areas of Iraq, have become seasonal offensives, where success is measured most often by the number of insurgents captured and killed. But that is not success. And "sweeping and leaving" is not working.

Instead, coalition forces need to clear and stay. They can do this with a modified version of traditional counterinsurgency strategy. Andrew Krepinevich, Tom Donnelly, Gary Schmitt, and others

have written about this idea. Whether called the "ink blot," "oil spot," or "safe haven" strategy, it draws on successful counterinsurgency efforts in the past. Rather than focusing on killing and capturing insurgents, this strategy emphasizes protecting the local population and creating secure areas where insurgents find it difficult to operate. US forces with Iraqi assistance would begin by clearing areas, with heavy force if necessary, to establish a zone as free of insurgents as possible. Security forces can then cordon off the zone and establish constant patrols, by American and Iraqi military and police, to protect the population from insurgents and common crime, and to arrest remaining insurgents as they are found.

In this newly secure environment, many of the tasks critical to winning in Iraq can take place—tasks that are not being carried out today. Massive reconstruction can go forward without fear of

attack and sabotage. Political meetings and campaigning can take place in the open. Civil society can emerge. Intelligence improves, as it becomes increasingly

safe for citizens to provide tips to the security forces, knowing that they can do so without being threatened. The coalition must then act on this intelligence, increasing the speed at which it is transmitted to operational teams. Past practice has shown that "actionable intelligence" has a short shelf life, and the lag involved in communicating it to security forces costs vital opportunities.

As these elements positively reinforce each other, the security forces then expand the territory under their control. Coalition and Iraqi forces have done this successfully in Falluja. They cleared the area of insurgents and held the city. Today Iraqi police and soldiers patrol the streets, with support from two US battalions. And when the Iraqi forces are at a level sufficient to take over the patrolling responsibilities on their own, American troops can hand over the duties. Falluja today is not perfect, but the aim is not perfection—it is an improvement over the insecurity that plagues Iraq today.

THE COSTS OF SUCCESS

This kind of a counterinsurgency strategy has some costs. Securing ever increasing parts of Iraq and preventing the emergence of new terrorist safe havens will require more troops and money. It will

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take time, probably years, and mean more American casualties. Those are terrible prices to pay. But with the stakes so high, I believe Americans must choose the strategy with the best chance of success. The Pentagon seems to be coming around on this, and top commanders profess to employ a version already. If the United States is on its way to adopting a true counterinsurgency strategy, that is wonderful, but it has not been the case thus far. Soon after the recent operations in Tal Afar, most US troops were redeployed, leaving behind Iraqi units with Americans embedded. I hope this will be sufficient to establish security there, but it is also clear that there has been no spike in reconstruction activity in that city.

To enhance chances of success with this strategy, and enable coalition forces to hold as much territory as possible, America needs more troops in Iraq. For this reason, I believe that current ideas to effect a partial drawdown during 2006 are exactly wrong. While the United States and its partners are training Iraqi security forces at a furious pace, these Iraqis should supplement, not substitute for, the coalition forces on the ground. Instead of drawing down, the United States should be ramping up, with more civil-military soldiers, translators, and counterinsurgency operations teams. Decisions about troop levels should be tied to the success or failure of the mission in Iraq, not to the number of Iraqi troops trained and equipped. And while American policy makers seek higher troop levels for Iraq, they should at last face facts and increase the standing size of the US Army. It takes time to build a larger army, but had the United States done so even after its invasion of Iraq, its military would have more soldiers available for deployment now.

Knowing the enemy is the essential precondition to defeating him, and I believe US counterinsurgency strategy can do more to exploit divisions in the strands of the insurgency. Foreign jihadists, Baathist revanchists, and Sunni discontents do not necessarily share tactics or goals. Recent Sunni participation in the constitutional process—and especially the decision by Sunni parties to contest the December parliamentary elections—present opportunities to split Sunnis from those whose only goal is death, destruction, and chaos.

BUILDING SUPPORT FOR VICTORY

Besides changing military strategy, US policy makers need to take several other steps to assure success in the war. To begin with, they need to start keeping senior officers in place. The Pentagon has adopted a policy of rotating generals in and out of

Iraq almost as frequently as it rotates the troops. General David Petraeus, a fine officer who was the military's foremost expert in the training of Iraqi security forces, now uses his hard-earned experience and expertise at Fort Leavenworth. Others, including Generals James Conway, Ray Odierno, and Peter Chiarelli, have been transferred to Washington or elsewhere. This is deeply unwise. If these were the best men for the task, they should still be on the job. These generals and other senior officers build, in their time in Iraq, the on-the-ground and institutional knowledge necessary to approach this conflict with wisdom. They know, for example, the difference between a battle in Falluja and one in Tal Afar, or what kind of patrols are most effective in Shiite areas of Baghdad. These commanders—and their hard-won experience—need to stay in place.

Second, policy makers need to integrate counterinsurgency efforts at senior levels. While it is critical to focus American military efforts on insurgents, particularly against Sunni fighters using violence to improve their political position, the nonmilitary component is also essential. All Iraqis need to see a tangible improvement in their daily lives or support for the new government will slip. Sunnis need to feel that, should they abandon violence once and for all, there will be some role in the political process for them. The Iraqi people must feel invested in a newly free, newly powerful and prosperous country at peace.

There is a role for each element of the US government in this, whether it implies aid, trade, wells, schools, training, or anything else. US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad has done a fine job coordinating these efforts with the military campaign and the political process, but it needs to be done in Washington too. This should be the highest priority of President Bush's team, and must be managed by the most senior levels at the State Department, the Pentagon, the National Security Council, the US Agency for International Development, and any other agency that can contribute to the effort. To consign Iraq to the Pentagon to win or lose will simply not suffice.

In this regard, I am encouraged by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's recent testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which laid out a more comprehensive, integrated political-military-economic strategy for Iraq. Implementing it is essential and will require a more formal interagency structure than we have seen to date.

Third, the United States needs to build loyalty in Iraq's armed forces. In building the armed forces at a rapid pace, US and Iraqi authorities have invited

former militia members to join. In the short run, it is most practical to do what has been done thus far: swallow former militia units whole. In the long run, the focus must be on building diversified individual military units.

The lesson of Afghanistan is instructive. There, the United States insisted—over initial objections from the Afghan Ministry of Defense—that each new military unit be carefully calibrated to include Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and others. This diversification within units serves several important functions. Over time, it helps build loyalty to the central government. It makes it more difficult for militias to reconstitute, should any decide to oppose the government. And, more broadly, it helps build support for a unified nation. The multiethnic Afghan National Army has provided a powerful psychological boost in a deeply divided country. Simply seeing Pashtuns and Tajiks and Uzbeks, in uniform and working together, has had a great impact on Afghan public opinion and the way Afghans imagine their country.

In Iraq the policy has been to recruit former militia members as individuals, rather than as units, but the reality has fallen short. Building units in this way is more difficult and will require more time than accepting homogeneous Kurdish, Shiite, or Sunni units, for reasons of language, culture, and expediency. But that is precisely why it is so important to do. Standing up the Iraqi army is about more than generating manpower so that American troops can withdraw. The composition and character of the force that Americans leave behind will have social and political ramifications far beyond the military balance of power.

Fourth, policy makers should increase pressure on Syria. For too long, Syria has refused to crack down on Iraqi insurgents and foreign terrorists operating from its territory. President Bashar Assad said recently that his government distinguishes between those insurgents who attack Iraqis and those who attack American and British troops, suggesting they are “something different.” This is the same mindset that has led Syria to defy the United Nations over the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, give sanctuary to Palestinian terrorist organizations, and attempt to maintain some hold on Lebanon.

With the UN Security Council now engaged, the international community has an opportunity to

apply real pressure on Syria to change its behavior on all these fronts. While multilateral sanctions keyed to Syrian cooperation with the Hariri investigation may be the starting point, that should not be the end. Any country that wishes to see the Iraqi people live in peace and freedom should join in pressuring Syria to stop Iraqi and foreign terrorists from using its soil.

THE OTHER BATTLEFRONT

Finally, the United States needs to assure success in Iraq by winning the war on the home front. Even as the political-military strategy is being improved, the latest polls and protests suggest that the American public's support increasingly is at risk. If it disappears, the country will have lost this war as soundly as if its forces were defeated on the battlefield. A renewed effort at home starts with explaining precisely what is at stake in this war—not to

alarm Americans, but so that they see the nature of this struggle for what it is. The president cannot do this alone. The media, so efficient in portraying the difficulties in Iraq,

need to convey the consequences of success or failure there. Critics in the Democratic Party should outline precisely what they believe to be the stakes in this battle, if they are willing to suffer the consequences of withdrawal.

Another part of the effort includes avoiding rosy aspirations for near-term improvements in Iraq's politics or security situation, and more accurately portraying events on the ground, even if they are negative. The American people have heard many times that the violence in Iraq will subside soon—when there is a transitional government in place, when Hussein is captured, when there are elections, when there is a constitution, when there is an elected parliament. It would be better to describe the situation as it is—difficult right now, but not without progress and hope, and with a long, hard road ahead—and to announce that things have improved only when they in fact have.

Above all, winning the home front means reiterating the nation's commitment to victory and laying out a realistic game plan that will take America there. I believe that the vast majority of Americans, even those who did not support the initial invasion, wish to see their country prevail. They are prepared to pay the human and financial costs of this war

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if—but only if—they believe their government is on a measurable path to victory. That their government must give them. In this war as in all others, there are two fronts, the battlefield and the home front, and leaders must tend to both.

THE NUMBER THAT COUNTS

Despite bombs, daily attacks, and untold threats against the democratic process, Iraq has held free elections, with open campaigns and a truly free press. Iraq has ratified the most progressive constitution in the Arab world and instilled justice in a country that for so long lacked it. Iraq has put Hussein on trial and held his henchmen accountable for their murderous rule. In doing all these things and more, the Iraqi people have issued to their more peaceful, prosperous neighbors a profound challenge.

We have seen responses already in Lebanon's Cedar Revolution, Egypt's recent elections, and a proliferation of calls for democracy in the Arab world. As Iraq consolidates its democratic process, the challenge to its neighbors—and their necessary responses—will be starker still. The Iraqi people have shown their impulse toward democracy; they need security to hash out the many remaining differences that still divide them. They can get there, but they need America's support.

This much should be obvious: America, Iraq, and the world are better off with Hussein in prison rather than in power. Does anyone believe the stirrings of freedom in the region would exist if he still ruled with an iron fist? Does anyone believe the region would be better off if he were in power, using oil revenue to purchase political support? Does anyone believe meaningful sanctions would remain or that there would be any serious checks on his ambitions? The costs of this war have been high, especially for the more than 2,000 Americans, and their families, who have paid the ultimate price. But liberating Iraq was in America's strategic and moral interests, and Americans must honor their sacrifice by seeing this mission through to victory.

Victory will not come overnight. On the contrary, it will take more time, more commitment, and more support—and more brave Americans will lose their lives in the service of this great cause. And despite US cajoling, nagging, and pleading, few other countries around the world will share much of the burden. Iraq is for Americans to do, for them to win or lose, for them to suffer the consequences or share in the benefits. Progress in Iraq can be charted with all sorts of numbers. But in the end, there is only one United States of America, and it is to that nation that history will look for courage and commitment. ■