

Success may bring dangers of its own

Anthony Bubalo
The Australian
20 March 2007
P. 12

Among the protagonists in the Iraq war debate in Australia and abroad, today's fourth anniversary of the invasion will be spent somewhere between Schadenfreude and pig-headedness. Opponents of the war, to varying degrees, will be barely concealing their desire to say: "I told you so."

Proponents will mutter darkly about quitters and appeasers.

But those assuming that the new Iraq strategy announced by President George W. Bush in January, symbolised by a surge of US troops into Baghdad, is doomed to fail may be surprised.

The really interesting question is what happens if the surge works? What are the consequences of success for US -- and indeed Australian -- policy?

A month into the surge and some early signs are relatively promising. Levels of sectarian violence appear to have dropped while, according to a recent opinion survey, the confidence of ordinary Iraqis in their security has improved.

Of course, optimism this guarded comes with caveats. One reason violence is down is because Shi'ite militias have quietly slipped away from the fighting at the urging of the Shi'ite-led Iraqi Government. But just because they are off the streets does not mean they are out of the game forever.

Likewise, even if the surge reduces short-term levels of violence in Baghdad, this still leaves the rest of Iraq. The real reason the British have begun withdrawing from the south, for example, is not because the region is pacified but because London came to understand that its forces could no longer make any difference.

Yet the surge may still succeed where it always had to: inside the Washington beltway rather than on the streets of Baghdad. What became clear soon after Saddam Hussein was removed from power was that if there was to be a new Iraq it would not be built in one day.

Indeed, it would take a great many days and this would require not just progress on the ground but a long-term commitment from successive US administrations, the Congress and the US people.

In this respect, 2006 was a bad year for proponents of the Iraq war, or at least those who still believed that Iraq could and should be fixed.

Previously it had always been possible to point to signs of success, such as the Iraqi elections and the relatively high voter turnout at those elections despite the risks, as reasons to sustain the effort. By the beginning of this year even Bush was admitting that the violence had overwhelmed any political gains that the Iraqis had made.

Against this background, can the surge change the terms of the debate in the US again?

Maybe. If the administration cannot point to progress in coming months -- and it is a matter of no more than six to nine months -- then the debate in the US, and the war in Iraq, is unambiguously

lost. Political pressure for withdrawal, strong already, will become unbearable from Republicans worried about their future electoral prospects and Democrats finally emboldened to use their congressional power to real effect.

But if the administration can credibly point to some measure of improvement, such as lower US and Iraqi casualties, and perhaps some political and reconstruction progress, then it may just be able to wrest control of the Iraq agenda back from its political opponents.

Of course, this raises the question of what the administration may do in these circumstances and, indeed, what it should do. Would it try to build on these successes and stay the course in Iraq, perhaps extending the surge for additional months? Or would it be tempted to take the likely limited window of positive improvement to pull out most US troops in something less than ignominious defeat?

No doubt the Democrats will be pushing this line, not least to ensure that any future Democrat presidency is not lumbered with the consequences of Bush's war. But expect it also from the Right as well.

You see seeds of such thinking in the new rhetoric of Washington's neo-cognoscenti. Charles Krauthammer declares that the US gave Iraqis freedom and they chose civil war. John Bolton argues that it was right to overthrow Saddam but everything bad that happened since was the Iraqis' fault.

The implication is that Washington can leave Iraq with its head held reasonably high, having achieved what it essentially came to do but being let down by the people it came to save.

Such arguments are a bit rich, to say the least. As American defence commentator Anthony Cordesman has argued, the US's war in Iraq was like using a bull to liberate a china shop. And as he has pointed out in response to the Krauthammers and Boltons of US politics, now you are telling the china shop to put itself back together.

Moreover, as the British analyst of Iraq, Toby Dodge, has argued, when the US invaded Iraq it did not just remove Saddam; it committed "staticide". By, among other things, disbanding the Iraqi army and firing almost anybody with a Ba'ath party connection, the US destroyed the ability of the Iraqi state to deliver everything from basic services to law and order, such as that ability was after more than a decade of sanctions. Many of Iraq's problems continue to flow from this basic failure.

At the very least the US and its coalition partners have a moral responsibility to set things right in Iraq.

Beyond that they have strong national interest reasons to consider, given the consequences of a US defeat, in Iraq, in the broader Middle East and globally.

What this means is not just preparing for the day when the surge fails but thinking seriously about what to do if it succeeds.

Anthony Bubalo is program director for West Asia at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.