

Trouble looms, whichever path Bush takes

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It seems obvious, doesn't it? If the United States cannot bring peace to Iraq, it should get out. Everyone now agrees that the old policy of "staying the course" will not work, so the debate in Washington is between those who believe that some other strategy might work and should be tried, and those who think that nothing will, so the US should get out now.

Alas, it's not that easy. The sad fact is that nothing the US can do has much chance of working in Iraq, but withdrawal carries risks that might be a lot worse. That means the US will stay stuck in Iraq, unable to succeed and unable to leave. It is a tragic situation, entirely of George Bush's making.

The optimists and the pessimists have been parading their wares in Washington over the past few weeks, as Bush prepares to announce his new Iraq policy after Christmas. The blue-ribbon Iraq Study Group, which reported to the President earlier this month, falls into the pessimistic "nothing will work" camp. Its recommendations boil down to the simple idea that America should give up trying to fix Iraq's problems, and insist that the Iraqi Government fix them instead. If it doesn't, the US should pull out.

The chances of Iraq's Government being able to succeed are low, as the Iraq Study Group's shrewd old members must know very well. So this is an argument for withdrawal, dressed up to blame US failure on the Iraqis.

Blaming American failure on Iraq may salve US self-respect. But it will not solve the deeper problems created by the destruction of Iraq's old political order. Bush seems to recognise this, which is why he has been distancing himself from the study-group proposals and looking for other ideas. He has spent a lot of time recently talking to people eager to convince him that they have strategies that offer hope of success in Iraq.

These strategies all seem to be variations of two old ideas. The first is to send in more American troops to fight the insurgents. This makes sense only if there is good reason to think that more troops would make a big difference. That is unlikely to be true. With 130,000 troops America has been unable to stop the insurgency growing out of control. Why should an extra 30,000 or 50,000 troops reverse this trend? It looks like reinforcing failure. Shadows of Vietnam here.

The big lesson from the past 31/2 years in Iraq is how little the US has been able to control Iraq's territory, population or politics. That has not been because there have been too few American troops: it is because American forces are not designed to control territory and populations. They are the wrong tool for the job. More troops will not make any difference to that. They will just produce more casualties.

The second idea being canvassed as an alternative to pull-out is to put more American troops into Iraqi units to teach the Iraqis to fight the insurgents better themselves. This, too, has been tried before and failed. There are two good reasons why it will keep on failing. First, why should we expect American troops to teach the Iraqis how to fight the insurgents when we have seen that the Americans cannot do it themselves?

More fundamentally, the idea that America can build stable and effective government in Iraq by first building a strong Iraqi army puts the cart before the horse. You cannot establish a democracy by building an army. No army in history was ever better than the government it served. Iraq's army cannot bring peace to Iraq unless there is an effective and legitimate government for its support. Otherwise they become part of the problem, serving the interests of their sect, party or tribe - or themselves.

So none of the new ideas that Bush is being offered give him any serious chance of success in Iraq. Therefore, why not pull out? The old arguments for staying the course - that victory in Iraq is an obligation owed to the Iraqis, that it is essential to victory in the war on terrorism, and that defeat would humiliate the US - do not sound compelling any more. In the war on terrorism, for the Iraqis, and for US prestige, it is becoming hard to see how things could be worse. Staying longer will only make things worse.

And yet Bush will decide to stay in Iraq and for good reason. US forces in Iraq, for all their failure, still perform one essential function: they keep other countries out - especially Iran. All along, the strongest argument against invading Iraq and destroying Saddam Hussein's regime was that it would leave Iraq weakened and unable to resist Iranian hegemony. And so it has proved. The argument that will persuade Bush that he has no option but to retain large forces in Iraq is the fear that if they leave, Iran will dominate southern Iraq and eventually the whole Gulf. For Bush, for the US, and arguably for the rest of the world, this is a strategic nightmare.

The costs and risks of staying in Iraq are high, but they are known. The threat from Iran means that the costs and risks of leaving Iraq are unknown, but potentially much higher. Like most of us, when he has to weigh known costs against unknown risks, he will stay with the devil he knows, however painful. He has placed the US in this terrible position and he has only himself to blame.

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