

We Must Not Leave Iraq

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After months of deliberations, on December 6, 2006, the Baker-Hamilton Commission released its report arguing that the United States and, by extension, its Coalition partners, should change course on Iraq. The Congressionally-mandated study group, stacked with realists hostile to the idea that enabling freedom should be a foreign policy priority, recommended both a gradual pull-back of U.S. troops and a regional conference. Several experts who testified before the Commission said that, at any mention of democracy, former Secretary of State James Baker rolled his eyes.

The Baker-Hamilton Commission, though, is not the only Commission mulling Iraq strategy in Washington. The National Security Council is conducting its own review and the Pentagon is re-evaluating its own approach. The multiple commissions symbolize the lack of coordination and unity of mission that has plagued U.S. strategy and its execution since the months before the war began. While the White House was sincere in his call for freedom and liberty in the Middle East, much of the military and civilian establishment have both resisted his goals and worked at cross purposes to them. The old guard foreign policy establishment has resisted at every step. The result has been a muddle, as the U.S. shifts from one strategy to another. U.S. adversaries feed on Washington's uncertainty.

Presidents and prime ministers make decisions with the information at hand. The nature of intelligence is that it is seldom complete when it is time for a decision. The decision to use military force against Iraq was taken only after 13 years of failed diplomacy and a collapsing international sanctions regime. There was near universal belief that Saddam still possessed weapons of mass destruction. He had shown willingness to use them. He may have bluffed, but decisions must be made with the intelligence available. Presidents and Prime Ministers do not have the luxury of hindsight.

President George W. Bush was correct to believe that if, military force was inevitable, then it should be coupled with a goal to establish democracy.

Was it a fool's dream to believe it possible to establish democracy in the heart of the Middle East? No. One-in-six Iraqis had fled their country under Saddam's rule. Those that settled in the West thrived. There was no cultural impediment to democracy.

But the need for democracy is was not all about altruism. While dictatorships might promise short-term stability, with democracy comes long-term security. Much as they do with Bush, critics called Harry S Truman stupid and naive for embroiling the U.S. in a brutal, open-ended war in Korea. After all, Korea had a culture of authoritarianism with no history of democracy. Celebrity-seeking generals and cabinet members sought to undermine their commander-in-chief, and the press criticized him for his obstinacy. While Truman left office with the lowest popularity rankings in history, six decades later,

historians rank him among the top five presidents. Any juxtaposition of democratic South Korea with totalitarian North Korea today demonstrates his wisdom.

Still, after almost 3,000 deaths and many more wounded, the U.S. public has lost its will. The U.S. commitment to Iraq has lasted longer than its participation in World War II. Politicians of both major U.S. parties seek to cut-a-deal, declare victory, and withdrawal.

Bush remains obstinate, though, and with reason. The Middle East has long been bifurcated between autocrats and theocrats. Dictators argue to Western governments that their regimes provide the only bulkhead against radicalism, all the while crushing any emerging liberalism which might undermine the argument. Radicals blame the West for propping up their oppressors. While their hatred is constant, globalization had enabled them to act upon it. It is a no-win situation for the West. Bush, with his allies in London, Warsaw, and Canberra, sought to break the cycle.

And they might still do so, if they are willing to stand firm for their principles. Increasingly, though, it looks like Washington will not stand firm. Strategy in Washington prioritizes the next election rather than national or international security. Realists live in a short-term world of deals and deferred consequences. They have little use for freedom, morality, and commitment.

Rather than recognize the benefits commitment to freedom, diplomats see only inconvenience. Pleasing Berlin and Moscow becomes more important than successful completion of mission. While Ronald Reagan once stood firm behind the striking shipyard workers in Gdansk, the inheritors of his mantle have reverted to the age of his predecessors, the men who celebrated compromise at Yalta, turned a blind eye to freedom-seekers in Budapest and Prague, and sought to turn their back on Jews imprisoned in the Gulag. To these Realists, dissidents and democrats, whether in Iraq, Lebanon, or Iran, are expendable.

Another casualty of this realist wind is Washington's commitment to its allies. Poland knows this well with promises of visa-waivers long since forgotten. The stakes are even higher if the U.S. abandons Iraq, its mission unaccomplished. Across the Middle East, in Taiwan, and on the Korean Peninsula, liberals and democrats will be right to question Washington's commitments.

So what does this mean in the short-term? Rather than admit abandonment, U.S. and European foreign policy elites will counsel diplomacy and a regional conference. Their recommendation is based on the assumption that both Syria and Iran seek a stable Iraq. If this were the case, though, Damascus and Tehran would not train insurgents and militias, or supply them with high explosives

When faced with a hornet's nest, the two best options are to leave it alone or to get rid of it. The worst decision is to stir up the hornets and walk away. However politicians spin withdrawal, if under fire, it will be perceived in Iraq as defeat. Across the Middle East, dictators and their proxies will conclude that violence pays. Dictators will crush liberals

and Islamists will grow emboldened to take their fight to new battlefields. Believing the West to lack will, governments from Tehran to Pyongyang will grow bolder in defiance.

Leadership is not about polls and popularity, and strategies which shift with the public mood do not win security. If the Coalition is to win in Iraq and in the larger war against terrorism and dictatorship, it must not walk away from the fight. If the problem in Iraq is rule-of-law, then Coalition militaries must aim to fight terrorists and disarm militias. If these adversaries get support from outside powers, then the Coalition must be willing to interrupt and intercept such assistance.

Sometimes the fight for freedom suffers setbacks. Martial law followed the rise of Solidarity. But Washington should heed the lesson of Poland: abandonment and surrender are not policy. It is the long-term result that matters.

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