

Defining Victory

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AMERICA HAS no choice but to succeed in Iraq. The country's collapse could fuel chaos in the Middle East; a terrorist base there could support new attacks in America, in the region, in Europe and worldwide. The consequences of defeat in Iraq extend beyond this as well. As the only global superpower, the United States can afford to make mistakes—even big ones. But it cannot allow itself to be defeated in a priority-defining project like Iraq. After investing the lives and well-being of American soldiers, \$200 billion in taxpayer funds and substantial amounts of international political capital, failure could be very damaging both abroad and at home.

Why and how we got into Iraq and what choices could have been made differently: This is not central to when and how we get out. Only victory is. This is not to say that the Bush Administration has not made mistakes in the war and in the occupation. The U.S. assessment, shared by other governments, that Iraq was energetically engaged in WMD programs was clearly incorrect. The administration's expectations for postwar Iraq were also incorrect and led to a series of decisions—like disbanding the Iraqi army and other state institutions with

little thought given to what would replace them—that have made it harder rather than easier to set Iraq back on its feet. The role of Ahmed Chalabi and company in shaping U.S. policy certainly deserves much greater scrutiny in this connection. But the appropriate study and debate of “lessons learned” should not crowd out discussion of the way forward.

Unfortunately, at the political level that discussion has been weak so far. In fairness, the war in Iraq is a problem with no good solution. Still, after two years (and with no end in sight), we believe it's time for hard thinking.

Some—Republicans and Democrats both—are calling for the administration to develop an exit strategy and to implement a schedule for the withdrawal of American forces by a designated date, “limited only by steps to ensure the safety” of U.S. troops, in the words of the so-called “Homeward Bound” legislation. Others, who see Iraq as an instrument to spread freedom and transform the Middle East, seem prepared to accept a virtually indefinite commitment of American forces, resources and attention.

Both strategies are problematic. Withdrawal after a self-proclaimed “victory” that leaves the insurgency largely intact and operational would fool no one; Americans and others around the world know a real victory when they see one—and they know a defeat when they smell it. Setting aside the fact that it would

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allow a cancerous terrorism problem to metastasize, withdrawal would lead to inevitable (if inaccurate) comparisons to the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, intensified speculation about “imperial overstretch” and declining American power, and a costly loss of credibility and influence.

The reality is that to be effective in the international system, the United States must be respected by the good and feared by the evil. Recklessness in foreign policy decision-making can lead the good to fear rather than respect us—and encourage efforts to limit U.S. power—while fecklessness produces neither respect nor fear but contempt. Many outside the United States might interpret withdrawal from Iraq without a clear victory as a feckless end to what they saw as a reckless war and would draw appropriate conclusions. As Alexis Debat outlined in the Summer 2005 issue of *The National Interest*, it would also allow international jihadists to consolidate a “new base in Iraq around which the technical, financial and human resources of Jihad, Inc., can again coalesce.”

Saying that U.S. forces will stay in Iraq as long as they are needed and not one day longer is not really an answer. Nor is saying that we will leave when the Iraqis can “take care of themselves.” These statements are very difficult to define in operational terms; they also run the risk of encouraging Iraqi free-riding, limiting the pressure on Iraqi political leaders and citizens to make tough decisions.

President Bush is correct not to give the impression that U.S. determination to achieve a successful outcome in Iraq is wavering. But unwavering determination and its implicit or even explicit willingness to “pay any price” are not sufficient alone as a policy. In fact, in combination with expansive neo-Wilsonian goals, an unlimited commitment can lead to quagmire, burdening the United States with unbearable costs and an unacceptable

distraction from pressing international problems like Iran and North Korea and longer-term challenges like the rise of China. The United States is not omnipotent. Our financial resources are limited; the time and attention of our leaders is limited; the capacity of our institutions (including the White House staff, the military, the intelligence agencies and the State Department) is limited; and our political capital with other governments is limited. Fortunately, with an appropriate definition of U.S. objectives, it is still possible to achieve a realistic victory in Iraq.

What do we mean by “realistic victory”? We mean a meaningful success that would be widely interpreted as a victory by traditional international standards, namely, destroying a hostile regime and establishing a reasonably friendly and non-tyrannical government that threatens neither the United States nor regional allies like Israel.

Of course, because of some of the overblown rhetoric about Iraq, some will argue that anything short of full Jeffersonian democracy along the Tigris and Euphrates is a failure. We see no reason to indulge such fantasies. Democracy according to the standards of Western post-industrial states is not a precondition for victory; nor, as the London bombings tragically illustrated, is it a panacea for the problem of terrorism, whether home-grown or internationally inspired. Minimal standards of pluralism are all that is required to undermine most domestic support for terror—and they largely exist in Iraq. Paraphrasing Winston Churchill’s famous statement about democracy, what Iraq already has may not be perfect, but it’s better than the alternatives.

Rather than attempting to micromanage Iraqi politics and engineer the government and constitution, the United States should concentrate on destroying the international terrorists who have flocked to Iraq and preventing them from turning the country into a base. This ap-

proach would allow for a considerably reduced military presence (especially among politically sensitive National Guard and reserve units) even before more Iraqi forces are trained and deployed, with U.S. forces based outside cities and dedicated to securing Iraq's porous borders and fighting the terrorists and "dead-enders." Let the Iraqis take over responsibility for security in the cities so as to reduce our visibility and vulnerability there—and let Iraqis decide on the best means to combat internal threats to their security. (At a minimum, this should further encourage the Shi'a-dominated government to reach out to and accommodate Sunni leaders.) To the extent that U.S. forces play an active role in urban operations, it should be clear that when we act, we are acting in partnership with the Iraqi government and not unilaterally. As Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson note in their contribution to this issue, that has not been the case in the past, and this in turn has helped to stir up ill will against coalition forces.

More broadly, success requires giving real incentives to ordinary Iraqis. Let's face it: To quote Thomas Paine, Iraqis are going to be summer soldiers and sunshine patriots. Giving the Iraqi government clear responsibility for domestic security—the next logical step in establishing full sovereignty and something Iraq's government naturally seems to want—could change the way many Iraqis think about their country.

We are under no illusions that there is any cheap or quick solution to Iraq two years on. The strategy we propose is not a simple one to pursue, especially as terrorist attacks in Iraq focus increasingly on provoking sectarian conflict in an apparent effort to generate more violence or even civil war. The temptation to believe that we are more knowledgeable and effective in resolving internal Iraqi disagreements than the Iraqis themselves will be considerable, especially in the

wake of the inevitable further setbacks that remain ahead. But the Iraqis must solve their own problems, and waiting until they are "ready" when attacks average 65 per day means waiting indefinitely.

We hope that Iraq will eventually become a liberal democracy with strong checks and balances, firm protections for women and minorities, and other hallmarks of free societies. But achieving all this could take some time, and trying to do too much too soon could distract us from achieving what is genuinely essential: depriving Al-Qaeda of a base, closing Iraq's borders to foreign fighters, and developing a central government that is capable of ensuring some degree of stability without repressive methods or becoming too close to Iran, or both. As America's involvement in Iraq has already demonstrated, these goals alone are a tall order. They are also pursued more effectively by a smaller, less visible, less provocative military presence than is required for an ambitious nation-building project to create a beacon for the Middle East.

It is encouraging that the Bush Administration appears to be moving toward a significant withdrawal of forces from Iraq. Yet it is essential that this or any withdrawal be accompanied by a recalibration of our goals and strategy.

The United States can achieve a realistic victory in Iraq without killing every last insurgent, capturing every Al-Qaeda recruit, ironing out every dispute between Arabs and Kurds, Sunnis and Shi'as, secularists and Islamists, or solving every other thorny political or constitutional problem. Americans and others will recognize victory if we have managed to break the back of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and left in place an Iraqi government committed and able to prevent the jihadists from returning. Then the United States can turn its attention to other pressing problems that threaten the peace and prosperity of the Republic. □