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For Success in Iraq, Change Course

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Wednesday, September 14, 2005; A31

The Bush administration's mishandling of Iraq has brought us to the brink of a national security debacle. To salvage the situation, the administration must fundamentally change course inside Iraq, in the region and at the international level.

Stabilizing Iraq is a political as well as a military challenge. The administration is taking a huge gamble by going forward with a referendum for a constitution that is more likely to divide Iraq than to unite it.

A majority of Sunni Arabs are likely to vote against the constitution, but not the two-thirds needed to defeat it. That will further embitter them.

The consequences for U.S. interests could be devastating. Sectarian violence might escalate into a full-blown civil war, drawing in Syria, Iran and Turkey and turning Iraq into a new Lebanon. Even worse, Iraqi Sunnis could forge stronger alliances with foreign jihadists, turning a swath of Iraq into a pre-Sept. 11 Afghanistan for a new generation of terrorists.

Stranded in the middle of this mayhem would be brave American soldiers, their lives on the line for a failing policy set by others.

The Bush administration's hope seems to be that Sunnis and Iraqi women will "get over it." But hope and stubbornness do not constitute a strategy. As our ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, has said, the constitution should "be a national compact that brings Iraqis together and undermines the insurgency."

Sunni Arabs have themselves to blame for sitting out January's elections and supporting the insurgency. But unless they are offered a reasonable stake in the new order, they will continue to resist it. It would be a mistake to force-feed them a constitution they cannot stomach. There is a better way.

First, if negotiators don't reach reasonable compromises that bring moderate Sunnis on board, the Bush administration should support postponing the constitutional referendum until after elections for a new National Assembly are held in December, which would allow a new committee with elected Sunni members to reconsider the draft.

This would encourage the growing desire among Sunnis to participate in the political process. It would empower legitimate Sunni leaders who can sell the constitution to their community. And it could split the Sunni population from the insurgents and foreign jihadists. Moderate Kurds and Shiites, many of whom privately admit that some of their leaders overreached, will welcome the balance legitimate Sunni representation would bring to the process.

For this policy to work, the administration must do what it has failed to do thus far: involve the major international powers and Iraq's neighbors in a stabilization strategy. The administration should

create a contact group with countries such as France, Japan, Britain and Russia, along with organizations such as the European Union, NATO and the United Nations. As constitutional negotiations resumed, the Iraqis would see a united international front and be more likely to make difficult compromises.

The administration must also develop a regional strategy that either forces or induces Iraq's neighbors to act responsibly. In some instances, that would require the administration to engage regimes that the United States would rather not work with. But that's exactly what we did in the Balkans to get to the Dayton peace agreement and with Afghanistan's neighbors in the "six plus two" group and the Bonn conference. Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt could help temper the demands of the communities with which they have influence. Tehran and Damascus would be more likely to end their dangerous meddling if they saw the rest of the international community lining up with us. The president should immediately name a senior envoy to the region and organize a regional conference.

The president can build international support for this new policy at the United Nations this month. He should challenge those countries that have as much to lose as we do from chaos in Iraq to join this effort.

At home, President Bush must close the credibility chasm that is threatening the most important weapon our overstretched troops have: the support of the American people. He must convince Americans that he is leveling with them about the situation in Iraq and that he has a coherent strategy for securing our fundamental national interests and bringing our troops home.

To that end, the administration should develop concrete goals for training Iraqi security forces so that they can operate independently, building a political system that enjoys legitimacy and rebuilding basic services -- and establish a reasonable timetable for meeting these goals.

It is no longer acceptable to say that our troops will stay in Iraq "as long as necessary -- and not one day longer." The American people need -- and our troops deserve -- a much clearer picture of the way forward.

Congress must step up to its responsibilities by holding monthly oversight hearings with senior administration witnesses to assess Iraq's progress.

Some will argue that this policy would prolong our presence in Iraq. The opposite is true. Proceeding with an ill-advised referendum, and without a strategy to involve the region and the major powers, could lead to chaos that would take even more time, treasure and casualties to tame -- if it does not prove irreversible and leave Iraq what it was not before the war: a permanent base for radical fundamentalist terrorism.

Successfully involving moderate Sunnis, sharing the burden with the key international players, getting support from the region, setting concrete goals with timelines and insisting on regular accountability from the administration would bring our troops home sooner and safer. It's also the best way to leave Iraq with our most fundamental security interests intact.

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