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Gaps in Bush's Plan

By Jim Hoagland

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President Bush held out the promise yesterday of reductions of American troop levels in Iraq next year -- if they can be made on his terms. His speech at the Naval Academy took a necessary step toward hedging his Iraq policy in the face of popular discontent. But it is unlikely to be sufficient to change hearts and minds.

Bush's political purpose was spelled out on the signboards posted behind him for the television audience: "Plan for Victory." I have one, the president argued in his words and his resolute style. But there were crucial omissions in his attempt to take back the momentum in a national debate that has turned against him.

An effective endgame strategy must center on making U.S. withdrawal the primary catalyst for change in Iraq, rather than a grudging response to the political pressures at home and continuing losses in Iraq.

Those forces helped spark Bush's speech and the elaboration of his conditions for withdrawal. They also prompted the timing of the White House's release of a 35-page "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq."

Both the speech and the strategy document restate and refine Bush's still-firm commitment to finishing what he has started in Iraq. But they also understated or avoided the concrete details of the risks that any form of withdrawal, hedged or precipitous, will raise.

Making withdrawal a catalyst for change means equipping Iraqi forces with lethal U.S. weaponry -- something the Pentagon is reluctant to do. It means letting an elected Iraqi government run its own internal intelligence organization -- something the CIA is reluctant to do. It means taking the kind of big risks on Iraqis that Bush has been reluctant to take since the beginning of the war.

"I am dancing as fast as I can" seemed to be the true subtext of Bush's address. But he failed to show conclusively that his pace is fast enough to calm public opinion or to lead events in Iraq once withdrawals do begin.

Bush did make his first significant admissions that -- in the classic Washington phrase for refusing to assign responsibility -- mistakes were made. He highlighted failures in organizing Iraqi police and security forces into small units that were lightly armed with discarded Soviet-made weapons, if they were armed at all. Nothing more would be needed in the wake of a rapid U.S. battlefield victory and the centering of power in the hands of an occupation authority, it had been assumed.

His admissions indicate an awareness that Iraq turned out to be a very different, much more fragmented and inherently violent land than U.S. policymakers anticipated. Or, worse, than they were willing to admit in the first year of occupation, which featured experiments with sophisticated

but unworkable caucus arrangements to choose local officials and idealistic, irrelevant free-market scenarios for a war-devastated economy.

"I watched as we destroyed every weapon we found and assumed that we would be reequipping friendly units with U.S. arms. I was stunned when I saw I was wrong," says a former Defense Intelligence Agency analyst who worked in Iraq after the invasion. He concluded that U.S. commanders did not have enough confidence in the Iraqis they were recruiting to give them effective weapons.

"We lost a year on training and equipping an effective Iraqi force," Sen. John Warner (R-Va.) told me after listening to the president's speech, which he warmly praised.

Warner, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, confirmed that he has been urging the Pentagon to begin arming Iraqi units with standardized U.S. vehicles, rifles and other equipment to replace the hodgepodge of obsolete weaponry that the previous Iraqi interim government bought from former Soviet satellites in often dubious deals.

One quick way to accomplish this would be for U.S. units that are withdrawn to leave behind at least a portion of their equipment. Warner is considering legislation that would authorize that step if the Pentagon can work out details, he indicated.

"Yes, there are risks. But we have to take them, to say to the Iraqis: 'It's yours. You're a fully sovereign nation.' That will be the tipping point," says Warner.

Americans still have a limited understanding of -- and ability to mold -- Iraqi society. Neither wars nor speeches can change that. But the president needs to return to this subject again in the near future and demonstrate a deepening awareness that the war in Iraq must be fought first of all on Iraqi terms, by Iraqis, for Iraqi reasons.

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