



Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy • Center for Strategic and International Studies

1800 K Street, NW • Washington, DC 20006

Phone: +1 (202) 775-3270 • Fax: +1 (202) 457-8746

Web: www.csis.org/burke

US Strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan: Beyond Partisan Failure and Dishonesty

Anthony H. Cordesman

Washington, DC, May 2, 2007- President Bush's veto of the efforts of a Democratic Congress to impose benchmarks on the Iraqi government, and deadlines for withdrawal, has ended yet another round in one of the most unpleasant and dishonest partisan political debates in modern US political history. The question is what to do next, and whether either the Administration or Congress is capable of serving the national interest.

Both sides have failed the American people, failed the Iraqi and Afghan peoples, and failed to assert a meaningful role for the US to deal with its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Neither side has come to grips with the real-world issues involved or presented a credible plan for the future.

The Bush Administration's Failures

The Bush Administration has once again failed to provide meaningful leadership, and has fallen back on exaggeration and spin. It has grossly overstated the very real risks in setting timelines for US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and in creating over-rigid benchmarks for Iraqi government action, and created worst case scenarios that turn limited "worst case" possibilities into probabilities, if not certainties.

A rushed US withdrawal from Iraq might lead to an all out civil war or bloodbath, but probably would simply leave a shattered nation in lingering pain and division. The resulting power struggles would be violent and unpleasant, and probably lead to massive further displacements along sectarian and ethnic lines, but the cost would be a humanitarian disaster, not genocide, and it is unclear that letting Iraqis fight out their differences would ultimately be worse than having the US interfere in them.

The Administration's argument that Iraq would become a sanctuary for Al Qa'ida attacks on the US ignores both the strong and growing Sunni resistance to an Al Qa'ida takeover in Sunni areas, and the realities of Shi'ite and Kurdish power. If anything, the real risk is probably some form of continuing Sunni- Shi'ite struggle with outside support from Arab Sunni states and Iran. The result would be to worsen and prolong the struggle in Iraq, with some risk of it's spreading to neighboring states, but not a major rise in the threat to the US.

In any case, Al Qa'ida and other Neo-Salafi extremists now have plenty of other training grounds and bases that can be used to create terrorist cadres and prepare attacks: Afghanistan, Algeria, Chechnya, Egypt, Pakistan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen are all states fighting their own struggles against movements that can generate attacks on the US. There are covert springboards in Europe, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

The Need for an Honest, Real-World Statement of Risk and Needs, and a Workable Strategy

The deeper problem on the Bush Administration's side of the debate, however, is its continuing inability to set forth continuing long-term plans for action in any aspect of Iraq, Iran, and the overall war on terrorism. It still promises success far more quickly than anyone can hope to achieve it. It understates risks and grossly overstates current progress. It has slowly improved some of its metrics for analyzing the situation in Iraq, but no one can trust anything it says about progress in creating effective Iraqi military and police forces, implementing an effective economic aid program, or Iraqi success in governance and the rule of law.

Its "surge" strategy in Iraq is so far nothing more than a limited "plus up" of US forces that may, at best, succeed in bringing some degree of security to Baghdad. Even there, it hands the US military a challenge that it lacks to troop strength and civil- military capabilities to implement on its own. As US military commanders have repeatedly warned, any meaningful outcome requires a real strategy. It depends on much more success in Iraq political conciliation, a much more effective Iraqi government operation in the city and the country, a more effective Iraqi Army and police force than it may be possible to shape in the time available, and a much stronger US civil-military and aid component than the US may be able to deploy.

Real world success is scarcely "mission impossible," but it is certainly "mission improbable." It will also be "mission failed" unless the Administration can admit that real success cannot be timed to the 2008 campaign, and requires long-term plans and resources that extend out to 2013 and beyond. Success in both Iraq and Afghanistan may not take forever, but the entire history of failed and broken states, counterinsurgency campaigns, and peacemaking efforts is one of 10-15 year efforts. Most such efforts have limited success even then.

For the US to succeed in Iraq and Afghanistan, it needs leadership that is honest about the timelines, cost, and sacrifice involved. It needs leadership that admits what it will take to develop truly effective capabilities to govern, deal with crippling economic challenges, and create military and police forces that can stand alone. It needs leadership that does not counter impossible Congressional deadlines with false promises of past and future success.

In Iraq's case, it needs real-world plans for Iraqi conciliation that accept the fact that Iraqi

political realities mean this can take years to really implement even with substantial US and other outside aid. It needs to admit that all of the failures and waste in the economic aid program to date have wasted much of some \$38 billion in US, Iraqi, and international funds. It needs to admit that truly shaping Iraqi military forces will require years beyond 2008, and that shaping an effective mix of Iraqi police, criminal justice capabilities, local security, and militias is probably a three to five year challenge.

In the case of Afghanistan, the details differ sharply, but not the timelines and need for resources. The US needs to spend more, it needs a major aid effort shaped to deal with a crippled state that is 85% rural, and it needs realistic timelines for creating effective Afghan Army, police and local security forces, and national and local governance. It is only with the FY2007 supplemental that the Administration has even begun to come to grips with the level of effort required, and it so far has had only limited cooperation from its NATO allies. Nations like Britain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Poland and others have played an important role. "Stand aside" nations like France, Germany, Italy, and Spain are doing far too little under far too many national constraints that keep what they do contribute from being effective.

The Failures of a Democratic Congress

The Democratic Congress is no better. It has chosen to seize the low moral ground and posture there in safety. It is simply impossible to believe that the Democratic leaders of either the Senate or the House do not know their deadlines and benchmarks are unworkable. Far too many members and Democratic staff are all too aware of the realities involved.

The Benchmark issue is a phony and dishonest one on several grounds:

First, it was the US that originally blocked local elections that failed to implement the plans to disband the militias that were on the edge of success in the last days of the CPA, and that forced the secular core of the country out of governance through de-Ba'athification. It was the US that rushed Iraq into national elections using a system that virtually forced Iraqis to divide along sectarian and ethnic lines, and pushed a weak, divided, and inexperienced Iraqi political leadership into power. It was the US that pushed Iraq into drafting a constitution at a time when this virtually ensured sectarian and ethnic power struggles over every aspect of the Iraqi political system, and when the Sunnis have virtually no representation. The Bush Administration may well have a major responsibility for these actions, but no Democrat with any experience in Iraq can have any illusions about American moral and ethical responsibility.

Second, it is equally impossible to believe that the Democratic leaders in the Congress really believe that fixed timelines for premature American withdrawal, and unrealistic benchmarks and timelines for Iraqi political action, are going to rush Iraq into acting in ways that will unite rather than divide the country. There may well be some mix of incompetence among the lies and obfuscations, but again, the core expertise in Democratic members and staffs is simply too great for those involved not to know that

Iraq can only be exhorted, pushed, and influenced at rates that the Iraqi political system can actually deal with. The same is true of knowledge of how quickly security, Iraqi military and police forces, Iraqi government and the Iraqi economy can be improved.

Third, the core of success in Iraq is conciliation, and benchmarks for success cannot be measured in terms of action by the Iraqi leadership and parliament. This is not a nation with effective central governance and a rule of law. The Iraqi government may be able to "propose" but it cannot "dispose." Iraqi factions are going to need time to work out compromises that are practical. Once they are legislated, it is going to take months - and often a year or more - for given factions to see that any given aspect of conciliation actually is implemented with any fairness and honesty. Trying to force the issue as if these realities did not exist can be disastrous. Encouraging action is one thing, but only quiet, consistent US negotiating efforts, time, patience, and persistence can succeed.

The legislation the Democratic Congress has pushed forward essentially cloaks a push to rapidly withdraw from Iraq without any clear regard for the consequences with a shroud of impossible political demands. Moral posturing thinly cloaks partisan political expediency in trying to capitalize on the fact the American people have largely responded to the Bush Administration's failures to provide effective leadership by wanting to get out of the Iraq War.

Quite aside from the fact that Democrats have the same moral and ethical responsibilities for the consequences of American actions in Iraq as Republicans, the Congress has failed in other respects. No Democratic leader should call for rushing out of Iraq without a clear plan for dealing with the consequences. It is perfectly fair for such leaders to say that the Bush Administration has failed in this respect as well. No member of the Administration has talked about what would happen if a civil war did reach intensities that made staying pointless, or an Iraqi government came to power that asked the US to leave. The Administration has no clear, detailed plan beyond the tactic of the surge, and has never discussed alternative strategies.

It is, however, the Democratic leadership that is calling for quick withdrawal. To advance legislation without hearing, plans, and clear political statements about what would happen, what the consequences should be, and how the US should reshape its strategy, diplomacy, and military posture in the region is unconscionable. Expediency and partisan advantage are not a policy, a strategy, or a plan.

The Democratic leadership also seems to have forgotten that we have two wars, and could lose both. Once again, the Bush Administration can validly be criticized for systematically underfunding and undermanning the US effort in Afghanistan through 2006. The fact is, however, that the country team in Afghanistan did succeed in getting some its plan and in getting a request for the funds that are needed to win into the FY2007 supplemental and FY2008 budget request. This needed to be rushed forward, not delayed. According to assessments by the US country team, the Taliban expanded its area of influence by well over four times in 2006. Democratic leaders have to know this, and the fact is that the money in the request is still too little to meet immediate needs. The US

does not need to lose two wars for the price of one.

Profiles in Cowardice

If the actions of the Bush Administration and a Democratic Congress were a Shakespearian tragedy, the key line would immediately have to be "a pox on both your houses." Even with effective bipartisan action, the odds of success in Iraq are probably one in four at best, and Afghanistan is fragile, increasingly uncertain, and tied to the growing risk of Pakistani political instability and inability to act. Both sides are locked into a debate based on false and dishonest premises, both are failing to meet their responsibility to the American people, and both are profiles in cowardice.

If there is any hope beyond a bitter, self-destructive partisan political struggle that drags on until the US suffers from a major defeat or a new Administration comes to power, it does not lie in taking either side. It lies in having outside foreign policy experts, analysts, and media saying that the actions of both sides are unacceptable. The US needs a bipartisan dialog and negotiation with itself far more than it needs one with Iran or North Korea. It needs realistic long term strategies, plans, and budgets. It needs to plan for alternatives without sinking into partisan paralysis. It needs to look beyond 2007 and 2008, and remember that America has a future.