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America's Last Chance in Iraq:

Changing US Strategy to Meet Iraq's Real Needs

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America has no good options in Iraq, and the odds of any form of enduring success are even at best. At the same time, the situation is anything but hopeless and the US desperately needs to pursue the best strategy it can in spite of all the risks and uncertainties.

The US faces major problems simply in withdrawing, it has vital strategic interests in the region, and it has a moral and ethical obligation to the Iraqi people. Moreover, even if the US does not have good options, it does have options that provide a reasonable prospect of bringing security and stability to Iraq -- *if* Iraq's leaders move forward to achieve a significant degree of political conciliation and compromise.

The Real-World Constraints on US Withdrawal

The US cannot simply rush out of Iraq without destroying or leaving behind vast amounts of military equipment. US policy choices are limited by the practical problems in withdrawing what has become a truly massive military presence. It is far easier to talk about rushing out of Iraq by presenting vague concepts and simplistic "strategies" than to develop practical plans that can actually be executed. It is equally easy, however, to exaggerate the difficulties and turn withdrawal into mission impossible.

If the US is forced to rush out of Iraq, it could withdraw its personnel relatively quickly. Moving people, rather than supplies and equipment, would take no longer than one to two months. The US may be forced to execute this option: a new, more hostile government might set a deadline for leaving; an all out civil-war could push the US into a far more rapid withdrawal; or rising internal conflict could force the US into withdrawing some forces to main bases outside the area of Iraqi internal strife while rushing most forces and contractors out of the country. The fact that the US should not plan for the worst case does not mean that the US should not have worst-case contingency plans.

Under most conditions, however, the US should carry out a carefully phased withdrawal that removes, destroys, or transfers weapons, stocks, and other equipment. It must close or transfer bases and facilities, and have a clear plan for trying to preserve the capabilities of the best Iraqi security forces. The US has some 160,000 military personnel in Iraq and a matching or greater number of civilians and contractors. It has between 140,000 and 200,000 metric tons of valuable equipment and supplies (some put the number closer to 300,000 tons), and some 15,000-20,000 military vehicles and major weapons. Manpower and equipment is dispersed in many of Iraq's cities, occupies massive main operating bases with extremely valuable military facilities, and is deployed in numerous forward operating bases.

A secure withdrawal that removed all US stocks and equipment and phased out US bases at the rate US military experts prefer could take some 9-12 months or longer. Some put the total time period at two years.

This does not mean that the US cannot find some intermediate solution that would trade speed of withdrawal for increased cost and risk. The more equipment and facilities the US is willing to destroy or abandon, the quicker the US can withdraw. Under these conditions, the US could rush some of its most critical equipment out in no more than a few months.

Such an approach would, however, involve transferring or destroying substantial facilities and stocks, and any equipment left behind could fuel a civil war. It would mean largely abandoning US aid and advisory efforts in Iraq, and ignoring the fate of over \$20 billion dollars in aid projects. It would also probably mean abandoning the immense new US embassy being constructed in Baghdad, which would then become the most expensive white elephant in the history of diplomacy and an extraordinary monument to human folly even by the demanding standards of the Middle East.

The US may ultimately have to make a rushed withdrawal, either because a future Iraqi government demands it or civil fighting makes the US position untenable. The end result, however, is likely to be highly destabilizing in both Iraq and the region, and extraordinarily costly in terms of abandoned or destroyed stocks and equipment. A slower withdrawal -- tied to clear plans to offer aid and an advisory effort to provide political, economic, and military incentives for conciliation -- would be far better, but would depend heavily on Iraqi support and cooperation.

Moreover, any reductions must consider that much of the US combat presence is now exposed in forward operating bases and high-risk positions in the Baghdad and Diyala area. Withdrawals involve more than numbers. The US tactical position in every area of combat operations should be phased out smoothly, even at the cost of steadily reducing the area of operations to the point where the US often will be able to do little more than protect its remaining presence and lines of supply. Contractors and civilians will need secure routes for withdrawal, and help to return home and deal with problems like employment. Iraqis, who bet their lives and families on US plans, will need sanctuary.

US Strategic Interests in Iraq

Far more is involved, however, than the costs and risks of removing US troops, civilians, and contract personnel, and doing so with minimal risk and careful attention to what happens once they return. For all the talk of reducing US dependence on energy imports, the Department of Energy projects such measures will at best halt the increase in US dependence during the next decade, and the US will remain dependent on a global economy that is reliant on the flow of Gulf energy exports. Iraq alone has some 12% of the world's proven conventional oil reserves, and the Gulf has more than 60%, as well as nearly 40% of the world's gas.

Iraq's importance as an energy power, its strategic importance in the Gulf region, its potential impact on the fight against Islamic extremism and terrorism, and its role as a buffer state against Iranian ambitions, are all reasons to try to bring stability and security to the country.

US Moral and Ethical Obligations to the Iraqi People

The US did not offer the Iraq people an opportunity for democracy and development that they somehow ungratefully rejected. America played a major role in shaping current events in Iraq and its mistakes are legion. They include:

- The failure to prepare for stability operations and nation building after the fall of Saddam.
- The ideological nightmare of half-formed plans and incompetence under the CPA.
- Giving exiles that sought factional advantage instead of national progress a key role in governing Iraq and shaping US policy.
- Blocking local elections and creating an electoral system based on nation-wide lists of unknown candidates, which almost forced voters to choose along sectarian and ethnic lines.
- Long delays and unworkable plans for the development of Iraqi security forces.
- Rushing a constitution into place without regard for its divisive effect on sectarian and ethnic differences.
- Wasting much of some \$38 billion in aid money and Iraqi funds.

The US has a direct moral and ethical responsibility for a brutal, half-formed process of sectarian and ethnic separation that has created more than two million exiles, over one million displaced, eight million impoverished, uncountable thousands of killed and wounded, and ongoing fighting and cleansing in much of the country.

The Real World Surge and America's Real World Options

America's options, however, are limited. The days in which the US could experiment with Iraq as an exercise in political theory are long over. The US cannot impose its will on Iraq. It is dealing with a sovereign government and leaders that so far have not reacted to continuing US pressure at the highest levels to move forward towards conciliation and compromise.

America does, however, retain immense influence because of the role its military forces still play, its role as a major aid donor, and the potential value of its advisory services and help in dealing with outside powers. This gives the US one last opportunity to look beyond the narrow issue of troop withdrawals, and come to grips with the reality that the US may be able deal with the Iraq that actually exists, and help it achieve some degree of security and stability.

That window of opportunity is limited, and not just because of US domestic politics and the unpopularity of the war. Iraqi politicians have wasted more than a year on empty words and drafting exercises. In the real world, Iraqi time is catching up with US time.

Public opinion polls show a broad loss of confidence in the government. Many Sunnis – as well as some senior Shi'ite officials and officers – see the Prime Minister's office as linked to Shi'ite militias and sectarian cleansing, and unwilling to compromise with Sunnis. Worst of all, the country is dividing into de facto Kurdish enclaves in the north, and a Shi'ite enclave in the south that is dominated by militias and party gangs in many areas. Anbar is being taken over by Sunni tribes.

In the north, the Kurds are steadily consolidating control, while the future division of the north between Kurdish and Arab controlled territory remains unresolved.

In the center the Sunni "tribal awakening" has severely weakened Al Qaeda's control of Anbar. The US country team in Iraq has made a skillful effort to support this effort and try link it to the central government, but its potential to ease sectarian tension and unify the country depends on central government support of what will be a Sunni enclave with undetermined power and size. So far, the Sunni central government has been slow to build-up lasting links, or to win broader Sunni support through political compromise and conciliation.

The central government may deploy forces to the south, but it is losing influence and control to local leaders and feuding local Shi'ite factions. One of the ironies of the US debate over the success of the surge is that it has largely ignored the fact that control over Iraq's four southeastern provinces – with more than 30% of its population and some 80% of its oil exports (90-95% of government revenues) – are now in the hands of rival Shi'ite factions and militias.

Security in Baghdad is relative. The US claims to have increased security in Baghdad from 8% of the city to some 50%, but it has quietly lost much of the country where the central government has little or no presence or control. Moreover, the "surge" has faced other major challenges:

- Weakening Al Qaeda and the Sunni extremists have left Sunnis in Baghdad and other areas in the center weaker and less able to resist sectarian cleansing. The worst violence has gone down, but a combination of the Sadr militia (JAM) and supporting elements in the Army, National Police, and regular police continue to support sectarian cleansing and exploit Sunni weakness.
- The attacks on the worst elements of the Sadr militia have eliminated rogue units under Sadr, leaving his power and most of the Shi'ite militias intact.
- Delays in resolving Kurdish-Arab tensions and the future of the Kurdish zone and areas like Kirkuk have not stopped ethnic pressure or cleansing and the slow build-up of forces on each side.
- Iraqi military forces clearly are not as ready as the US hoped, and the police can play only a very limited role in supporting "win" with "hold" and "build." If it had not been for the tribal

awakening, the US would not have had a large and effective enough combination of Coalition and Iraqi forces to make the surge even begin to work.

- The US has shown its new guerrilla tactics and focus on aggressive forward action, staying after victory in a “win and hold” posture, and working closely with local leaders in civic action programs do have major benefits. The US simply does not have the forces, however, to secure Baghdad, secure the Baghdad ring, and hold significant areas in Diyala. The surge is relatively manpower intensive and driving Sunni insurgents out of Baghdad and Anbar still leaves too many areas for the US to secure even in central Iraq.

The surge alone not only can't work without Iraqi political compromise and conciliation, US forces simply are not large enough to secure all the violent and divided parts of the country. Unless the Iraqi government acts to share wealth and power in ways that stabilize these enclaves and strengthen their ties to the central government, it is doubtful that the present Iraqi government can hold together. Worse, sectarian and ethnic cleansing go on in Baghdad, Diyala, Ninewah, and Salah ah Din provinces, and a US campaign focused on Al Qa'ida threatens to tilt the balance in favor of Shi'ite extremists like the Sadr militia.

What Does the US Need to Do?

What does the US need to do? The most important task is to reinforce what it is already doing to push Iraq's leaders toward political conciliation and compromise. Unless Iraq's major factions can reach some kind of modus vivendi, US military gains and aid activity cannot have a lasting impact, and “strategic patience” becomes an exercise in futility. Worse, the central government will continue to lose popular support and control over Iraq's Arab Shi'ite, Arab Sunni, and Kurdish zones, and be seen as a Shi'ite government serving Shi'ite interests.

The US is already exerting pressure on Iraq's leaders at virtually every level of the US government, and the key problems in moving forward toward compromise and conciliation are Iraqi, not American. The US may, however, be able to do more by offering aid incentives and distancing itself more from the Maliki government. There are now far too few unambiguous “carrots” and too many of the wrong kind of “sticks.”

At the same time, it must be made explicitly clear that US support of the government is not open ended and that Iraq must make major, substantive progress no later than early next spring. US actions in Iraq need to be “conditions based,” rather than tied to inflexible deadlines. While the US must avoid setting rigid deadlines and “benchmarks”, forging some form of Iraqi political conciliation and coexistence can only take so long. If the key elements of a compromise between Arab Shi'ite, Arab Sunni, and Kurd are not in place by some point in the late winter or early spring, the current political structure of Iraq and its national government are likely to implode.

This means the US must force the issue on a weak, minority, and unpopular prime minister and his cabinet. It needs to steadily pressure factions and key politicians, and make it clear to each faction that the US will not wait indefinitely or provide support for

any faction that fails to move forward. If the end result is that the US is asked to leave – or sees Iraqis cannot reach some new compromise -- so be it.

The fact is that nothing else the US does in Iraq can matter unless the central government and Iraq's key leaders find a way to share oil money and resources, share power with the provinces and local governments, give the Sunnis a fair share of wealth and power, and build Iraqi security forces that bring security and stability to all Iraqis and share control of security among the major factions. This is no exercise in political theory, democratic legitimacy, or the rule of law. Iraqis need to see tangible progress in all of these areas that affects their day-to-day security and economic conditions. More talk, declarations, and laws will not hold things together.

At the same time, the US cannot afford illusions about how far such conciliation and compromise will go. The US needs to face the reality that Iraq will not be the stable and democratic country the US originally tried to create for years to come – if ever. Iraq's central government will long be a weak and ineffective answer to governance and much of Iraq has already split into different sectarian and ethnic subregions: The Kurdish enclave, the Shi'ite south, and a Sunni Anbar. All will retain a local sectarian or ethnic identity, set their own political goals, determine their own patterns of local governance, and require separate efforts to and minimize various forms of internal "cleansing."

The key question is whether the brutal nature of Iraq's ongoing sectarian and ethnic division can be eased, and whether the mixed areas that are subject to ongoing conflict can be made relatively stable without indefinite periods of "cleansing" and killing. In practice, the US cannot reshape the character of Iraq's developing Arab Shi'ite, Arab Sunni, and Kurdish zones, although it can use aid and advisory efforts to influence them. The US needs to focus its aid and security efforts on Iraq's sectarian and ethnic fault lines, *if* Iraq's leaders move forward. The right US aid and security programs might just tilt the balance towards security and stability if the US concentrates on dealing with the Iraq that is, rather than the Iraq it wanted.

The Future Role of US Military Forces

Although it has never publicly announced it, the US has already accepted the fact that the focus of US military action cannot be to secure the entire country. Instead, the US focused its military and security efforts on continuing to do what it can to end the worst cleansing, killing, and brutality in mixed areas and along sectarian and ethnic fault lines.

This does mean looking beyond Baghdad, and the relatively narrow coverage of the original surge strategy. It means continuing to use a mix of US forces, Iraqi government forces, and local forces to help bring security to Baghdad, Diyala, Ninewah, and Salah ah Din provinces. This task should become far easier and require far fewer US troops if Iraq's leaders agree on compromise and conciliation. It should allow far more rapid US troop reductions and ease the impact of Shi'ite sectarian influence over the Iraqi security forces.

At the same time, the “Anbar model” is really a de facto recognition that a useful US security effort must recognize Iraq's sectarian and ethnic divisions and the continuing weakness of its central government. The US must work with local security forces whenever it can. It must accept the fact that the police and other security forces in many areas will have a sectarian and ethnic character with more local and regional loyalties than national ones. The US must seek to use aid and advisory efforts to moderate their conduct, and build ties between them and the central government.

The US must accept the fact that its influence in the Shi'ite south is already very limited, that intra-Shi'ite power struggles are the dominant security problem, and that it faces increasing pressure from Iran. The present lack of any US plan or strategy for dealing with the south is a crippling limitation of the surge strategy, and one that ignores an area far more important than Anbar. The US must also tie its aid and advice to local forces' conduct in dealing with other Iraqis. Partition is anything but “soft” and making any Iraqi compromises work in security terms may well take years of US aid and negotiating effort.

Far too many elements of Iraqi security forces remain undeveloped or are still part of the problem and not the solution. The US needs to “zero-base” several key elements of its present program:

- The one area that has shown great promise is the Iraqi regular armed forces, particularly the army. The current US plan, however, is trying to do too much too quickly, and transfer responsibility while many Army units still have ties to sectarian cleansing and Shi'ite leaders. Political conciliation – including bringing more Arab Sunnis into the Army – is critical to success since a truly national Army cannot come into existence without it. Another key element is a US aid plan that would explicitly offer aid for several more years, not just through 2008, and help Iraq develop forces that could defend the nation against its neighbors – a key incentive for future cooperation.
- The National Police cannot be healed or reformed. They are a symbol of sectarian cleansing and Shi'ite abuse of Sunnis. They need to be purged and folded into the Army. This should be part of an Iraqi conciliation plan, but the US should offer aid.
- The regular police will be regional and largely local sectarian and ethnic in character. The US should continue to offer Iraq aid in developing the kind of national cadres of specialists needed for national law enforcement. However the US must accept the true future nature of the police, and the fact that many Sunni insurgents and Shi'ite militia elements have to be incorporated into such forces, while mixed and more neutral forces are needed in troubled areas.
- Border and port forces are important, but the Iraqi-Syrian and Iraqi-Iranian border have never been secure in the past, and political compromise will require much more balanced efforts to deal with infiltration and external threats.

The need to restructure US efforts to develop Iraqi security forces serves to illustrate the fact that any form of “success” will require continued effort throughout the life of the next Administration and probably beyond. The Bush Administration needs to reach out to the Congress and the American people in ways that might win bipartisan support and lay the groundwork for a successful transition to the next Administration.

The future of US military presence in Iraq, and US advisory efforts and security aid must be clearly and explicitly addressed in a plan that is both public and transparent. The US must adapt to conditions as they develop, but there should be a clear plan for withdrawal. This plan must show Iraqis, the region and the world – as well as the American people and the Congress – how the US plans to pull out its military forces and how it proposes to do so if conditions permit.

It is also time to clearly show Iraqis, and the region, that the US has no military ambitions in Iraq. This plan should make it clear that the US will not retain bases unless the Iraqi government absolutely demands US security aid; and will phase down its force strength to a mix of advisors and enabling elements like air and sustainment support as soon as it can. The plan should make it clear that a continued US military and advisory role depends on rapid progress during 2008 to create an Iraqi army that shares command roles and unit strength among Iraq's factions.

It should specify that that the US will not support any the pro-Shi'ite units like the national police or provide aid to forces that carry out any form of "cleansing." It must make a US presence explicitly conditional on Iraqi efforts to create a balanced mix of regular police based on local sectarian, ethnic, and tribal structures that can win popular support and provide true local security.

Dollars as Well as Bullets

Such a plan must be part of an integrated US plan for Iraq that looks beyond the security dimension and recognizes that economics and the conditions of life are as important as security and conciliation. US must offer Iraqis the right kind of dollars and not just the right kind of bullets.

The best way to phase down US troops is to offer a mix of aid and efforts to develop Iraqi security forces that can replace them, but this is only part of the story. The US must fundamentally recast a failed aid program for governance, economic development, and improving the rule of law that has disgraced all the agencies involved. The appointment of the first aid coordinator in Iraq, roughly three and one-half years after the fall of Saddam, offers some hope that the various US aid efforts will be forced to coordinate, work together, properly staff their efforts, set meaningful priorities, and create meaningful measures of effectiveness – something no agency or component of the aid effort has done to date. The sacrifices of the aid personnel in the field may finally be matched with effective planning and leadership at the top.

What is needed, however, is decisive action. The US needs to develop and present a detailed real world program – with clearly defined actions, costs, effectiveness measures, and a unified interagency approach – and one that explicitly focuses on the fact that Iraq is a nation at war.

This program must restructure US aid efforts to deal with wartime priorities and urgent needs rather than the present chaos of uncoordinated "feel good" efforts. Every agency

involved must be firmly committed to interagency cooperation, realistic security assessments, meaningful evaluation of need, and honest effectiveness measures. None of these criteria have been met to date.

Urgent efforts are needed to create clearly defined US aid incentives for conciliation and coexistence. These efforts must include:

- Developing a serious multiyear aid program with clear priorities, well defined programs, and detailed funding plans that reflect the need to transition from war and civil conflict to peace rather than aid priorities based on a unified and peaceful nation that does not exist.
- Accepting the need for tailored efforts that offer Arab Shi'ites, Arab Sunnis, and Kurds help in achieving local security and stability while providing incentives to support the central government and limit sectarian and ethnic cleansing.
- Broadening the focus of aid efforts that impact on the most divisive sectarian and ethnic areas and going beyond CERP to try to produce lasting incentives for conciliation rather than just achieve short-term tactical advantages.
- Phasing out US program and project planning and contracting and management efforts as soon as possible. Structure US aid efforts to require Iraqis to do all planning, management, and execution. Emphasizing Iraqi counterpart funding, and have the US aid community provide aid in planning, set clear management and audit procedures to limit waste and corruption, and provide transparent and honest reporting on Iraqi execution of programs and projects and their effectiveness.
- Determining just how much of some \$22 billion in US aid (and a total of \$38 billion in US, Iraqi and other funds) has produced projects that are actually effective and can be transferred to the Iraqis. Link further funding to Iraqi plans and capability to sustain such efforts or write them off as a sunk cost.
- Creating programs that can actually revitalize Iraq's oil industry and exports under wartime conditions. Oil is the key to political compromise and conciliation. Unless every major faction believes they will get a proportionate share of a steadily large pie, no compromise or conciliation can succeed.
- Providing essential water, power, and other services in the field rather than focusing on efforts that try to reinvent the national infrastructure. Linking further major structural aid to the national infrastructure to Iraqi plans and ability to execute them once compromise and conciliation are achieved.
- Making transparent, public assessments of how Iraqi central government ministries and officials spend the nation's income, the effectiveness and integrity of how they spend it, and the political equity of such spending. Stop making the ability to draft budgets and spend money the sole (and virtually meaningless) measures of effectiveness.
- Salvaging state industries or offering clear substitutes in the many cases where this is not possible.
- Providing aid at the local and provincial level to meet urgent needs.
- Developing a credible plan to revitalize agriculture, and one that looks at the overall structure of agricultural development and the use of water in ways that examine the problems in

- Iraq's markets, dams, and irrigation systems in the context of possible federalism and sectarian and ethnic interests.
- Creating serious employment efforts rather than bragging about creating 130,000 aid jobs in a country with a labor force of 7.4 million (1.8% of the labor force in a country with more than 30% unemployment and over 50% combined unemployment and underemployment.)
 - Tying the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (EPRT) efforts to an overall plan to use aid to bring security and stability to the most troubled regions and help the more stable areas move towards broad development, rather than provide uncoordinated, limited "feel good" efforts on a target of opportunity basis.
 - Restructuring aid in governance to accept the fact that Iraqis are in charge at the ministerial and every other level. In many cases, this may mean they will reject US aid and advice or ignore it. In other more accepting cases, they will need long-term aid and advisory efforts that are supportive and responsive, rather than attempt to tell Iraqis what to do. This means reinforcing existing efforts with the staff levels, expertise, and continuity necessary to provide serious help when given ministries are willing to accept it.

Increasing the Odds of "Success"

Can such a US strategy work? The answer is almost certainly no -- as long as Iraqi political conciliation and compromise are not an ongoing reality. The odds will be very different, however, *if* Iraq's leaders move forward in several key areas, and ones that are often very different the Congressional list of "benchmarks."

- Agreeing to share power, jobs, and money in the central government in ways that give the Sunnis a proportionate share as well as Shi'ites and Kurds, and end the Shi'ite bias in the central government's ministries and activities.
- Recognizing that the future sharing of petroleum wealth and resources -- not democracy -- is the key to compromise and conciliation. Passing a full oil law and acting on it to show it has meaning.
- Legislating and acting on "re-Ba'athification" to remove legal and de facto barriers on Sunni participation in the government, armed forces, and society. Providing amnesty programs for former Ba'athists, insurgents, and militia members.
- Giving teeth to the provincial powers act, ensuring that significant oil money and resources flow to provincial and local authorities, and moving forward to try to hold meaningful local elections -- recognizing the limits imposed by the sectarian and ethnic realities on the ground.
- Finding a formula for federal areas that can give formal structure to the areas that are already divided along sectarian and ethnic lines, and which offer guarantees to the minorities in these areas.
- Establishing a similar structure for mixed areas that can share power between mixed populations.
- Restructuring the Iraqi Armed forces, Ministries of Defense and Interior, and the truly national elements of the police and security forces to ensure a suitable mix of Arab Shi'ites, Arab Sunnis, Kurds and other minorities.

- Formally recognizing that most local police forces will not only be local, but also will reflect local sectarian and ethnic divisions, and have to fold in significant militia and insurgent elements. Focus on limiting the resulting sectarian and ethnic abuses, and making local forces work.
- Defining the national, regional, and local court system and rule of law in ways that offer reasonable degrees of protection and equity.

Progress is not needed in all of these areas at once, and near-term success is needed in only the top five. If Iraqi's leaders can move forward in these areas by the spring of 2008 there will still be sufficient reasons for the US to sustain its efforts in Iraq and to take the risk as long as there is an ongoing process of Iraqi political compromise and conciliation.

The US, however, needs to get its house in order, not just Iraq. Trying to "stay the course," exaggerating progress and understating risks, relying on rhetoric and empty slogans, and playing out the surge is not the answer. It may buy time in September, but it will lose even more credibility in the months to come and it will not deal with any of the key problems at issue.

The Bush Administration needs to lay out a clear, detailed, and public plan for US efforts to achieve conciliation, build up Iraqi forces, withdraw US forces, and provide long-term aid to Iraq in improving its governance and in economic development. It must replace the present policy debate between staying the course versus precipitous withdrawal, communicate a new focus on realism, and show that its practice is good as well as its intentions.

It also needs to present a credible "Plan B," or range of options, for the contingency where Iraq's leaders do not move forward. This is not simply a matter of withdrawing US troops. Like staying in Iraq, such plans must be conditions based, and provide a picture not only of how rapidly the US can withdraw, but what kind of advisory, aid, or contingency presence it might keep. Even the most massive and rapid US troop cuts would not mean that the US can give up on Iraq or its strategic interests in Iraq and the region.

This is the way to rebuild Iraqi trust, regional and world respect, and to develop some degree of sustained support from the Congress and the American people. It is also the only way to create a carefully managed reduction in US forces that can minimize the risks of such cuts, and create a bridge for sustained action between the Bush Administration and its successor.

The Congress and Democratic candidates also, however, need to look beyond political opportunism and the 2008 election. Whatever the mistakes of the past, the US needs to look at its moral and ethical obligations and future strategic needs. If Iraq can be made to work, it needs a bipartisan effort and a clear commitment from the next President. This does not mean supporting the current US troop levels, or an open ended commitment if Iraqi political conciliation does not move forward dramatically by this spring. It does mean an extended commitment if conciliation takes place.

Failure can always be quick. Any form of success will take at least half a decade of strategic patience.