

The \$10 solution

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

A year ago Thursday, President George W. Bush announced his "New Way Forward" in Iraq. By the most important measurement - huge reductions in U.S. and Iraqi deaths - it has been a remarkable success. We say that as a newspaper that has been critical of the American misadventure in Iraq since Day 1, and despite our skepticism of a year ago about the troop "surge" and policy shifts involved in the "New Way Forward."

Although by most other measurements, the last year in Iraq is a success only by comparison with the three years before, the fatality numbers don't lie: In December 2006, 112 U.S. troops died in Iraq. A year later, the figure was 23. In May of 2007, 126 U.S. troops were killed. A month later, as the full effect of 30,000 extra troops of the surge began to be felt, the number dropped to 101. The number has been declining, more or less steadily, ever since.

Here's another number that doesn't lie: \$10. Ten bucks is the daily "fee" (some say a better word is "bribe") the United States now pays to each of the 70,000 "concerned local citizens" in Sunni tribal areas to persuade them to stop cooperating with insurgents.

That's \$255 million a year to buy their cooperation. The obvious question is how long the "CLCs" will have to be paid off. But even if it's 10 years, it's less costly than prosecuting the war for a single week.

While violence is down, it is by no means gone. Six U.S. soldiers were killed Wednesday when a booby-trapped house blew up in Diyala Province south of Baghdad. Not long afterward, U.S. planes dropped 50,000 tons of bombs in a single day on insurgent strongholds in Diyala and other southern provinces.

And Iraq continues to exude bad news: We learned last week that in May 2005, security guards working for Blackwater Worldwide on behalf of the State Department dropped CS gas from a helicopter onto a crowd at the Assassin's Gate checkpoint outside Baghdad's Green Zone. CS is a form of tear gas the use of which is strictly controlled by the U.S. military - unlike Blackwater itself.

Further, last week a military judge overruled the conviction of Army Lt. Col. Steven Jordan, the only officer court-martialed for the 2003-2004 Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandals.

Eleven enlisted men and women were convicted by courts-martial. But no one else above them on a chain of command that went as high as former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was held to account.

These issues are important in the Arab world because they underscore the perception of the United States as an unaccountable occupying force - a condition that the culture of the Middle East regards as humiliating.

This undermines the progress made by Gen. David H. Petraeus's counterinsurgency tactics. The ultimate reality is that after nearly five years, Iraq is still far from being able to govern itself. For all that the Iraqis chafe against the U.S. presence, without it the current semi-peace could not hold. The political goals of Bush's "New Way Forward" still are unmet. Government ministries have splintered into a kind of cornucopia of corruption. The Shiite coalition that dominates the government avoids allowing meaningful roles for Sunnis, suggesting that when and if the United States leaves, civil war is inevitable.

In the Sunni tribal areas, those concerned local citizens are taking their \$10 a day and regrouping into militias in anticipation of the day they will have to fight for survival. In the Shia neighborhoods of Baghdad, the Mahdi army of cleric Muqtada al-Sadr consolidates its hold. In the north, the Kurds are restive. In the south, in Basra, religious Shiites govern with one ear cocked east to Iran.

Bush is visiting the Middle East, although apparently without any plans to enlist regional powers in an Arab plan to secure Iraq's future. Because of troop rotation schedules, the Pentagon plans to withdraw five brigades (about 20,000 troops) by midsummer.

What's left will be called a "peacekeeping" force, but the peace will be very hard to keep. In an interview with NBC News on Friday, Bush was asked if he thought U.S. forces might stay in Iraq for as long as 10 years. "It could easily be that," he replied. "Absolutely."

If it is 10 years, it won't be easily.

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