

Hoping to hear more from the new guy

by Lionel Van Deerlin

Another defense secretary is sworn into office. His brief acceptance remarks contain just one solid promise.

"I will go to Iraq," he says.

Most Americans - indeed, 72 percent of us by the last polling count - may have hoped to hear something more than this from the new guy. Going on four embattled years, now, Iraq has suffered from no lack of U.S. visitations. It has hosted an endless succession of diplomatic personnel, private contractors, congressional and other pundits. Plus, oh yes, nearly 400,000 of our armed military, a number likely to rise if the president gets what he asked for this week. Meantime, things over there have got steadily worse.

When a similar promise - Dwight Eisenhower's "I will go to Korea" - was uttered in the 1952 presidential campaign, people at least knew the action in that war theater was winding down. Although Secretary Robert Gates' installation came just days before we celebrate peace on Earth, there was scant sign that this joyous state might embrace violence-torn Iraq.

Since he says he'll be flying there to consult U.S. generals "on the ground," I beg to ask - is this trip necessary? One need not head for Baghdad just now to get a sense of the place. Does anyone suppose that Sunni, Shia or Kurdish spirits will be lifted by the sight of still another Air Force 747 swooping in with high-level personnel aboard?

Gates may evoke a ripple of applause by what must seem a "plus" - that he is not Donald Rumsfeld. But he totes the same baggage. He works for the only man who counts, the one whose misjudgments catapulted us into war with Iraq and the only one who can get us out.

That fellow, however, will be back in Washington or in Crawford, Texas, trying to make up his mind what to do next. Yep, the commander-in-chief.

Still, President Bush's options are narrowing. He has made it clear he would not be greatly influenced by findings of the Iraq Study Group, a covey of elder statesmen assembled to help him out of a tight spot. Bush acknowledges the need for a "new strategy" in Iraq, but doesn't wish to be rushed. He feels it can wait until sometime in January.

Or maybe till St. Swithen's Day, whenever that falls. As a parting shot at the study group, Bush is said to

have commented, "I'm not going to outsource the job of commander-in-chief." This, of course, prompted one wag's question, "Why not? You're outsourcing just about everything else in this war."

Albeit unconsciously, the president may have revealed his real reason for going slowly. In the first week of January, both houses of Congress, together with their countless committees, will pass from White House control to Democratic leadership - this, the result of midterm elections. The Bush team may correctly anticipate a number of penetrating investigations (with their torrent of subpoenas) into the performance of all those private companies the United States has hired, and enriched, since attacking Iraq in March 2003.

At least 150 of the U.S. Embassy's incredibly bloated Baghdad staff are said to be rummaging through the major contracts that seem certain to come under review - deals that often were thrown together under emergency conditions with a minimum of negotiation and an absence of oversight. Such conditions, it goes without saying, invite corruption on a scale to mortify the Mafia.

The full scope of such shenanigans can't be known until appropriate witnesses are sworn in. But in its July 2004 issue, *Government Executive*, an obscure trade journal, lifted a lid on how the system works.

Or, more specifically, how it does not work. The article, by Shane Harris, tells how a frequent shift in our top civilian command meant the constant revamping of reconstruction contracts. In numerous instances, moreover, objections raised by the government's own inspectors general were waved off on grounds that the product or services involved were needed in such haste that normal contracting standards could not be observed.

Harris' conclusion: "The plan appears to have been to let the private sector manage nation-building, mostly on their own."

Business Week last July 31 added this withering assessment:

"The losses to fraud and waste are almost certainly in the billions. ... The Special Investigator General for Iraq says it has 80 open investigations and has referred 20 more cases to the Justice Department for prosecution."

Which could be one reason Bush is taking his time.

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