

Bush should listen to his generals

by *The Peoria (Ill.) Journal Star*

Perhaps the best reason to heed former Secretary of State Colin Powell now is because no one did before in a Bush administration that has taken multiple wrong turns in its war in Iraq. Powell, author of the Pottery Barn principle - "You break it, you own it" - has turned out to be something of a reluctant prophet on Iraq.

Powell also is author of the Powell Doctrine, which says that America should only enter conflicts of choice where it has an excellent shot of winning, with overwhelming force and never without an exit strategy. The general reiterated that position Sunday regarding a proposal being contemplated by the White House to send at least 20,000 more troops into Baghdad in one last attempt to salvage an honorable conclusion to a horribly flawed effort.

"I am not persuaded that another surge of troops into Baghdad for the purpose of suppressing ... this civil war will work," Powell said. "If I was still chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, my first question is ... what mission is it these troops are supposed to accomplish? Is it to secure Baghdad? In which case the American Army isn't large enough to secure Baghdad, and we should not use our troops as policemen.

"The active Army is about broken," so "that surge cannot be sustained," continued Powell. As for "winning" the war, "Victory means you have gotten rid of every insurgent, and you have peace throughout the country. I don't see that in the cards right now," he said. "Victory is not in the hands of the American government or the American president. ... Victory is increasingly in the hands of the Iraqi leadership. If they can't pull it off ... the United States is not going to be able to do it for them."

In virtually any endeavor, if what you're doing isn't working, you should try something else. That's true with an exclamation point in Iraq, where the current strategy clearly isn't working for U.S. soldiers, and even less so for Iraqi citizens being kidnapped and often slaughtered by the score.

It is possible to make the case that America ought to take one more overwhelmingly forceful shot at Iraq before leaving the Middle East to the meltdown that many are predicting in the short term. But that effort should have a real chance of making a difference. Clearly Powell is not confident the latest proposal does. Even Sen. John McCain, perhaps the loudest, most consistent voice for more troops, acknowledges it may be too late.

Forget the Iraq Study Group and its controversial recommendations for a moment. For all his talk about letting the military commanders on the ground guide his decision-making, this president hasn't. He did not listen to then-Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki when he called for a much more formidable force following the initial invasion. Apparently he is not listening now to Gen. John P. Abizaid and Gen. George Casey, our two top commanders, who believe more troops are impractical and unlikely to coax the Iraqis into standing up. He didn't listen to Powell.

Perhaps these generals with actual military experience know something the White House doesn't. Perhaps President Bush ought to try something new and pay attention.

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