

Success in Iraq is still possible if we persevere

by Robert_J_Caldwell

Wars are never won by the faint of heart. Iraq will be no exception.

While defeatist Democrats in Congress push for prompt troop withdrawals and artificial timetables, President Bush favors further military and political efforts to achieve the mission's objective - a stable, democratic Iraq that can govern and defend itself.

Whatever chance there is of accomplishing this mission, quitting now is a guarantee of failure and defeat.

Recriminations over the many mistakes and misjudgments of the past four years don't help us decide on the best way forward now. Bush and his new general in Iraq, the brilliant and visionary David Petraeus, have a plausible military/political strategy that offers the best chance of success. Democrats believe the war already is irretrievably lost.

It's obvious which side in this debate retains the will to persevere in the face of adversity.

The Bush/Petraeus strategy is based on several central truths.

First, securing Iraq's capital city of Baghdad is absolutely essential. If coalition forces and the Iraqi government cannot control the capital, they have no hope of extending the government's authority across all of Iraq. Indeed, no government can function if it doesn't control its own capital city. Baghdad remains the center of gravity in the military/political struggle to stabilize Iraq by defeating al-Qaeda terrorists, containing a Sunni insurgency and stopping sectarian death squads.

Second, Baghdad couldn't be secured without more U.S. and Iraqi forces. Last year's Operation Forward Together, a U.S.-Iraqi security offensive in Baghdad, failed twice because there were too few American troops in particular to implement the "hold" portion of a clear-and-hold strategy. Thus, Bush's "surge," three or four more brigades (about 3,500 soldiers each) for Baghdad and an additional brigade for insurgent-hotbed Anbar province, is a precondition for success.

Third, U.S. forces needed a new counterinsurgency and security strategy. Concentrating U.S. combat forces in huge fortified bases isolated from the Iraqi population precluded effective counterinsurgency. Without establishing an enduring, neighborhood-by-neighborhood presence, there was no chance of protecting the civilian population. Protecting civilians is indispensable to success in counterinsurgency warfare.

Aggressive implementation of Petraeus' new strategy is producing encouraging results even with only two of the five new brigades as yet deployed in Iraq.

Violence in Baghdad is down by 50 percent or 60 percent since January. Intelligence tips provided to U.S. and Iraqi forces by local civilians are way up over just a few months ago. Three large bomb factories and numerous arms caches have been discovered and destroyed. The sprawling Shiite slum known as Sadr City, once a no-go area for American troops, is now regularly patrolled. Local markets, previously shuttered out of fear of car bombs, are now reopening. Ethnic cleansing in Sunni and Shiite neighborhoods is abating. Evacuees from some of these neighborhoods are beginning to return.

Most encouraging of all, there are ample signs that Iraqi civilians in Baghdad credit U.S. forces with the improved security and are cooperating accordingly.

In Anbar province, local Sunni sheiks have turned against al-Qaeda and its plague of violence and terror. They're sending their young men off to join the Iraqi army and police. What's more, they are actively assisting U.S. forces in the hunt for al-Qaeda's terrorist cells and command structure.

Petraeus and his superiors in Washington recognize full well that progress in the military battle won't be enough if Iraq's democratically elected but, so far, inept government cannot deliver on the political front. Without sectarian reconciliation especially, the larger struggle for a stable Iraq may not be winnable.

But Petraeus also knows that without better security, starting in Baghdad, the prospects for political progress will remain bleak. Shiites and Sunnis won't trust each other enough to compromise politically if their brethren are being butchered on a daily basis. Military and political progress must proceed in tandem. One without the other cannot succeed.

Yet, even on the troubled political front, there is some progress. After months of delay, the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has formulated an oil revenue pact that gives Sunnis an equitable share of the petroleum wealth found mostly in Shiite and Kurdish regions. If approved by Iraq's parliament, this would be a momentous step toward sectarian reconciliation.

None of this means, of course, that anything like "victory" in Iraq is imminent. This will be a protracted struggle under any imaginable circumstances. Even if U.S. combat forces could safely begin a phased withdrawal in 2008, thousands of American troops would almost certainly remain for years to train and advise Iraqi forces, provide essential logistical support and as a strategic backstop for anti-terrorist operations and to preclude intervention by Iraq's neighbors, Iran in particular.

But neither is this the hopeless mission doomed to fail, as portrayed by those who would quit now and who imagine that defeat in Iraq would have no consequences. All this is worth remembering as we mark the fourth anniversary of a difficult but far from impossible mission in Iraq.

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