Headed down the wrong track

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

What's the outlook for Iraq? Try as we might to keep our spirits up, the war effort has suffered what must seem a serious setback this week. President Bush telephoned Nouri al-Maliki to show that he retains full confidence in the Iraqi prime minister.

Oh my. Bush's full confidence puts al-Maliki up there with Alberto Gonzales, Paul Wolfowitz, former Federal Emergency Management Agency boss Michael Brown and other failed stalwarts who have inspired confidence in this president.

You must be doing a heckuva job, Nouri. Otherwise, would Bush have interrupted a weekend stay at the Crawford ranch to express his high regard for your performance?

For any of us who might wonder what in particular elicits the president's faith in al-Maliki, there are only the meager scraps of a report on their conversation as conveyed by a deputy press secretary. To wit:

"President Bush reaffirmed his confidence in the prime minister and noted the courage he has shown during a challenging and difficult year." Al-Maliki, we're told, renewed his commitment to national reconciliation. Also - and get this - his commitment to an equitable distribution of Iraq's oil wealth among Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds.

"The two leaders discussed the importance of initiatives to secure Iraq's democratic gains," the report added. If they can think of any, that probably means.

We are left with the nagging suspicion that neither man brought up the sensitive question - how much longer are we talking about? Can Iraq expect American forces to remain on the firing line in that desert heat, taking casualties while nothing of importance seems to change? And with the Brits pulling out? I wonder if Bush wasn't tempted - just between us fellas, as it were - to confide his problem of the moment.

"Look, my friend," he might have said to al-Maliki, "we had an election last year, and the other party is in charge of Congress now. Things aren't as easy for me as before. Lots of Americans are nearly as sick of the standoff as your own people must be. Our Senate has been driving me up the wall to agree on a time limit for keeping our troops there, getting shot at. I wouldn't go for that, but now they're asking for written assurances that your Sunnis will make nice with your Shiites.

"Sure, I can legally continue vetoing whatever restrictions those senators dream up, but I'm sort of alone on all this. The public is on their side, not mine. I don't know how much longer I can hold them off. Couldn't you do something to help?"

Whether or not Bush leveled with his trusted Baghdad ally, we may never know. But he has returned to Washington facing what are likely to be the least pleasant 20 months of his political life. In all directions - including, most recently, on immigration reform, the lone presidential initiative he'd been conceded a chance of winning - the second term seems turning to dust. The word applied most commonly to his administration: incompetent.

At ground zero of White House devastation sits Karl Rove, the onetime wizard whose mold of fact and fancy squeaked Bush through two national elections and who was presumed by some to have his party on course for a decades-long stretch of Republican rule. Rove is left to ponder the line Judy Garland's Dorothy remembers hearing in Emerald City: "I'm not a bad man, but a bad wizard."

As morale slips to new lows at the Justice Department, its top man stands before the world as government's most notorious toady since Robert Bork did Nixon's dirty work in the October 1973 Saturday Night Massacre. The Pentagon's long-festering intramural war between military brass and their civilian commissars is now presided over by an oddly named "war czar," while a bipartisan push to implement the Baker-Hamilton Group advice on Iraq remains unheeded. Meanwhile, a majority of Republican presidential aspirants strives to be helpful by arguing the desirability of torture.

Another hurricane season looms along the Gulf Coast, with inevitable reminders of government neglect in the Katrina crisis. As the pump price for gasoline hits new highs, the administration settles for auto mileage standards no more exacting than were set in Congress more than 30 years ago. As for the long-neglected threat of global warming, Washington thus far has played second fiddle to state and municipal actions from coast to coast.

Should we wonder why nearly three of four Americans tell pollsters we're headed in the wrong direction?

Van Deerlin represented a San Diego County district in Congress for 18 years.

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