The one that brung him

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

In a speech on Iraq last week at the Naval War College in Rhode Island, President George W. Bush referred to "al-Qaida" no fewer than 27 times. Back home in Texas, this is known as "dancin' with the one that brung you."

In the early years of Bush's presidency, it was the idea of retaliating against al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden that helped keep his approval ratings in the black. It was well into his fifth year before the smoke cleared and the majority of Americans could see that al-Qaida hadn't had anything to do with Iraq - not until after his administration's botched occupation turned the country into a vast encampment of insurgents, including a group that labeled itself "al-Qaida in Iraq."

Now, with the clock running down on even his own party's patience with the Iraq mess, the president has recalled the words of legendary University of Texas' football coach Darrell Royal: Use the tactics that brought you success. "Dance with the one that brung you."

At the war college, the president told his audience about "al-Qaida's remaining outposts" and "al-Qaida's safe havens" and "trapping al-Qaida" and "transit stations for al-Qaida." He said "al-Qaida wasn't pleased" about democracy coming to Iraq. And he said his troop surge was working in Anbar and Diyala provinces, because "Iraqis are beginning to understand that al-Qaida is the main enemy for Shia, Sunni and Kurds alike."

The one problem with Bush's speech was that it wasn't precisely true. As retired Army Maj. Gen. John Batiste, who commanded the 1st Infantry Division in Iraq, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee last week, "We cannot attribute all the violence in Iraq to al-Qaida. Al-Qaida is certainly a component, but there's larger components."

Bush also spent time last week trying to redefine "political success" in Iraq. When he announced the troop surge in January, he said it would buy time for the political process in Iraq to take hold. But Iraq's Parliament remains hopelessly ineffectual, and key questions about power-sharing among the Shia, Sunnis and Kurds are no further along than they were six months ago. This week, six Sunni members of Parliament resigned, citing Shia attempts to blame Sunnis for a rise in sectarian violence.

So now Bush talks of political success at the local level, the tribal level. "We need to go beyond the Green Zone and look at Iraq from the bottom up," he said at the war college. "This is where political reconciliation matters most .... You don't read a lot about it. But it is making a difference in the lives of Iraqi citizens."

Civilian casualty numbers from the Iraqi government are notoriously inaccurate, but from May to June, deaths among Iraq's civilian population reportedly were down by 36 percent. A couple of hundred thousand more U.S. troops, a trillion more dollars, more counter-insurgency tactics and maybe Iraq is pacified in another five or six years.

And maybe this is the strategy Bush should have '"brung" to Iraq in the first place. But at this point, it's too little, too late.

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