

Still a winnable fight

by Robert_J_Caldwell

The domestic political divide on Iraq is now starkly apparent. Democrats overwhelmingly have become the party of conceding defeat and leaving. Most Republicans, although war weary, too, are willing to persevere in Iraq a while longer.

For now, that gives President Bush the upper hand on prosecuting a war he believes can, and must, still be won. To buttress his case, he can point to significant military gains in Iraq - antidotes to the pervasive defeatism of his critics at home.

Much is made of the dissent from Bush's Iraq policy of seven Senate Republicans, notably including heavyweights Richard Lugar and John Warner. But the GOP's Senate dissenters are outnumbered six to one by Republican senators who want to give Bush's surge - shorthand not just for 30,000 additional troops but for Army Gen. David Petraeus' whole new counterinsurgency strategy - a chance to succeed.

The Senate vote last week on troop rotations showed Democrats at least four votes short of the 60 votes needed to move controversial legislation, and way short of the 67 votes it would take to overturn a Bush veto.

A similar dynamic holds in the House. Only four Republicans joined all but 10 Democrats in voting to withdraw U.S. combat forces from Iraq by next April regardless of consequences or conditions on the ground. The Democrats' 223-201 victory was far short of what they would need to override a Bush veto. So, even in the House, where filibuster-proof supermajorities aren't needed to pass legislation, Democrats lack the votes to force a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.

What case can Bush make against giving up in Iraq? A far better one than his detractors think.

Just months ago, a Democratic-controlled Senate voted 81-0 to confirm Petraeus, an architect and fervent apostle of both the troop surge and a dramatically new counterinsurgency strategy, as the new U.S. commander in Iraq. Now, barely a month after all the additional forces are in place, Democrats are rushing to proclaim the surge a failure.

Petraeus has said all along that he needs until September at least to gauge whether his new strategy and the troop surge now finally in place can succeed. Repealing Petraeus' military mandate four weeks after its full-strength application has begun is worse than absurd, it's deliberate sabotage.

Even military know-nothings such as the Democrats' congressional leaders Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid can't be ignorant enough to imagine that an offensive only fully supported in June can be judged a failure in July. That applies to Lugar and Warner, too, who presumably know better on the military side but are close to giving up on the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

But is there any good military news? Yes, absolutely.

Sectarian violence, the Sunni vs. Shiite bloodletting that threatens to unhinge the entire U.S. mission in Iraq, is down 36 percent across the greater Baghdad area. More than 40 percent, and counting, of the neighborhoods in the Baghdad megalopolis now have a local U.S.-Iraqi security presence in the form of military substations and mini-bases.

A U.S.-Iraqi counterinsurgency offensive in Diyala province is reducing terrorist violence there and securing the provincial capital of Baquba, formerly an insurgent hotbed.

And then there is the stunning turnaround in al-Anbar province, a U.S.-Iraqi triumph with potentially war-winning implications.

A year ago, a leaked U.S. Marine intelligence report wrote off Sunni heartland al-Anbar, a province that encompasses one-third of Iraq, as irretrievably lost to Iraq's mainly Sunni insurgency. But this spring, a U.S. offensive coupled with a patient Army and Marine effort to enlist the province's Sunni tribal sheiks against al-Qaeda-in-Iraq bore spectacular fruit. An association, dubbed Anbar Awakening, of Sunni tribes dedicated to fighting al-Qaeda spread across the province.

Recruiting in Anbar for Iraq's army and police suddenly flourished. Coalition forces in Anbar were flooded with thousands of counterterrorism tips from local civilians. Ramadi, Anbar's provincial capital, was once one of the most dangerous cities in Iraq for U.S. and Iraqi forces. It is now one of the safest.

Comparable versions of Anbar Awakening have spread to neighboring provinces, including Diyala. If this movement, which is turning former anti-U.S. insurgents into anti-al-Qaeda militia fighters, can be sustained and expanded elsewhere, Iraq's principal terrorist threat can be defeated.

The core objective of Petraeus' counterinsurgency strategy is protecting Iraq's civilian population. Since January, this wholly new U.S. military doctrine in Iraq has produced tens of thousands of counterterrorism tips to coalition forces from Iraqi civilians. Millions of Iraqis, sick of the indiscriminate mass murder of car bombs and suicide bombers, will side with us and their own government against al-Qaeda if we can protect them.

This is the portent of an achievable victory in Iraq, if only U.S. forces are allowed to remain long enough and in sufficient numbers to make the new strategy work. That's the purpose of the "surge" in U.S. troop strength, and why these reinforcements are so necessary.

Obviously, Bush, Congress and U.S. commanders in Iraq are disappointed by the often inept political performance of the Maliki government. So far, it's made progress in fulfilling less than half of the political and military "benchmarks" set by Washington. But it's also fair to note that this democratically elected government is barely a year old. Fair, too, to note that Iraq's political culture - fractured by sectarian divisions, traumatized by a quarter-century of Saddam Hussein's brutal tyranny and with no prior experience in democratic governance - needs time and help to overcome the huge challenges it faces.

In the meantime, Bush still has sufficient political leverage to fight for and defend the U.S. mission in Iraq against Democrats whose only alternative policy is to set a date for defeat.

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