

Face Iraq reality

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

President Bush's full-throated defense of his Iraq policies - especially the recent troop surge - has apparently persuaded Congress to leave the administration unfettered until Sept. 15, when a Pentagon report is due on the progress of efforts to pacify Iraq and establish a stable government. But there is a disconnect between the president's rhetoric and the doubts voiced by many in his own administration. While attention has focused on Republican senators calling for a change in course, these internal skeptics may be even more important.

The list starts with Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Uncontradicted reports say he wants to cut in half the number of combat units used to keep the peace in Baghdad. Other senior administration and Pentagon officials are deeply pessimistic that the surge can achieve its main goal: providing a respite from Sunni-Shiite violence that would allow Iraq's fledgling government to get its act together and to begin to take over security and other responsibilities now handled by the United States. Instead, officials question whether Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki could unite rival factions to make such political progress in the best of times - and they cite the increasing sentiment among Iraqis that U.S. troops should just leave.

Indeed, the White House appears to be the only bastion of the administration with much hope that these huge fundamental problems can in any way be addressed by Sept. 15. This is why whatever the president's protestations to the contrary, we hope planners and strategists are already exploring possible new approaches. Whether or not the White House pursues such a prudent course, a restive Congress is eager to take the lead and force changes in Iraq policy. Senate head-counters say GOP defections make it increasingly possible there could be a filibuster-proof 60 votes for an amendment setting a timetable for withdrawal along the lines of proposals from the Iraq study group.

Barring dramatic gains in Iraq, such legislation is inevitable. Both in Congress and among the public in general, there is an obvious bipartisan appetite for a staged pullback of U.S. troops and the adoption of much more modest goals for U.S. policy in Iraq. If the president merely acknowledged this was an option, it would have the immediate salutary effect of creating a new urgency on the part of Iraq's leaders to work together before their American protectors begin to retreat. By making Baghdad somewhat more secure, the surge, paradoxically, may have increased complacency among Iraqi leaders, Sunni and Shiite alike. And until these leaders are able to form a unity government, the chances for a satisfactory outcome in Iraq are bleak.

We supported the war in Iraq. But after four years and four months of increasing disappointment, the time has come for a reckoning. It may be painful, especially for the president. It is, however, essential.

"We're going to get it as stable as we can, with the troops we have, and in the time available. And then, we'll back out as carefully as we can," a U.S. military intelligence official told *The Washington Post*. That view may not be one-millionth as ambitious as saying we would make Iraq a beacon of democracy and hope in the Middle East, but it may be the best we can do.

Reprinted from The San Diego Union-Tribune.

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