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Win-win solutions in Iraq

Limiting the debate to whether troops stay or go limits U.S. options

BOB PERKOWITZ
Special to the Observer

The biggest issue in America today is Iraq. If, how and when the American military leaves Iraq has immense implications for our national security, international reputation, domestic politics and economy. Moreover, every month we delay a solution to the war, we sacrifice hundreds more coalition and Iraqi lives.

The debaters on the war fall into two philosophical camps: those who want the troops out, and those who want them to stay. Interestingly, both sides have the same goals. We all want to protect America from terrorism, have a strong and respected military, leave Iraq in some stable state, and minimize the loss of American lives.

On the "early exit" side of the debate are experienced foreign policy and military veterans like Rep. John Murtha, former U.S. national security advisor Brent Scowcroft, former Defense secretary Melvin Laird and former head of the National Security Agency William Odom. They believe America's presence in Iraq inflames the insurgency, weakens America's military and moral authority, and bolsters terrorism worldwide.

Experienced politicians led by President George Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, and including Sens. Joe Lieberman and Joseph Biden, are in the "stay the course" camp. They believe an American withdrawal from Iraq emboldens our enemies, and they accuse those who disagree of demoralizing our troops and wanting to "surrender to terrorists."

Poll questions affect results

America's public opinion on an Iraq exit strategy depends on where citizens get their information and how the issue is phrased. If the question is "finish the job" versus "come home now," as it was in a Fox News/Opinion Dynamics Corp. poll last month, 55 percent of Americans think the troops should "finish the job" and only 36 percent want them to "come home now." If the question is phrased "oppose the war" versus "favor the war" or "bring most of the troops home in the next year" versus "wait until a stable government is established in Iraq," as it was in separate CNN/USA Today/Gallup and Harris polls last month, the answers are dramatically different. Between 59 percent and 63 percent of us want America out of Iraq sooner rather than later, and only 29 percent to 33 percent of Americans support the war.

What does the "stay the course" strategy look like? Gen. George Casey, America's current commander in Iraq, said that the U.S. role is "one of the elements that fuels the insurgency." He believes that on our current path, America will have to "stick it out" for another decade to pacify and stabilize Iraq.

The leading "early exit" plan is Rep. Murtha's redeployment strategy. He believes that removing American troops from immediate harm's way over a six-month period, diplomatically pursuing security and stability in Iraq, and keeping a quick reaction force of "over-the-horizon" Marines in the area to support the diplomatic solutions will provide the best prospects for the future of America and Iraq.

Both sides in the stay-or-go debate acknowledge that: 1. the American presence in Iraq does in some ways feed the insurgency, 2. the major destabilizing conflict in Iraq is not between the insurgents and Iraqis, but rather among the dominant ethnic factions, the Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds, and 3. that more Arab and international support would enhance the prospects for a successful solution in Iraq.

One other fact must be acknowledged. Many Americans believe that we invaded Iraq primarily to find weapons of mass destruction, stop terrorism, save Iraqis from Saddam or further democracy in the Middle East. People in other nations believe that America is in Iraq primarily to secure access to Iraqi oil.

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Renounce oil, occupation

These points of domestic agreement and international disagreement support new solutions to the Iraq war.

Whether we leave Iraq in the foreseeable future or stay the course indefinitely, America's moral authority and security would be enhanced if President Bush announced that America will not assume any control over Iraqi oil nor maintain any permanent military presence there. Credibly renouncing claims to Iraqi oil and permanent military occupation removes much of the logic for the insurgency.

Then America should allow U.N., Arab or other national forces to participate as equal partners in a transitional policing of Iraq and announce a free-trade policy for the rebuilding of Iraq. This would encourage true international support for Iraqi security, reconstruction and democracy, saving lives and money.

America has achieved regime change in Iraq. "Mission accomplished" will occur when Iraqis control their own country.

We can support the goals of both the "stay the course" and "get the troops out" advocates by renouncing claims on Iraqi oil and permanent bases on their land. Unless we are being misled about American intentions, this should be an easy way to move closer toward a successful end to the Iraqi War.

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