

Iraq should cause us to rethink go-it-alone policy

The centerpiece of the Bush administration's strategy in the war on terror is pre-emption based on intent, manifested in our declared readiness to move against any country that could develop weapons of mass destruction and deliver them to terrorists. Our pre-emptive war against Iraq was justified in that context.

The administration has argued that our campaign against terror must target multiple enemies, from al-Qaida to rogue states to proliferators of weapons of mass destruction, and that Iraq presented such an imminent threat. President Bush has described the struggle as an open-ended campaign that could last a generation, and he has committed the United States to the goal of fostering democracy across the Middle East.

The record of the war in Iraq indicates that this strategy may prove too broad in scope and too costly in economic and political terms, and it may ultimately strengthen the appeal of radical Islamist terrorism across the globe.

The nation-building project in Iraq is likely to take years, if not decades, and will require sustained financial investment and the long-term presence of the stabilization force to succeed. Growing separatist pressures in Iraq, continued instability and violence in that country, and the rising costs of our occupation show that if the United States is to succeed in the Iraqi reconstruction we need to rethink our overall strategy to avoid another such open-ended commitment.

Most of all, we need to begin thinking seriously about sharing the burden of the war with allies and supporters who may have disagreed with our policies in Iraq, but who, like us, are threatened by terrorism.

The present U.S. approach rejects balancing and deterrence, opting for unilateral American action instead. It sets as the end goal a comprehensive political transformation of the entire Middle East. Such massive regime change

across the region is a breathtaking goal, and the scope of the U.S. commitment of resources is unprecedented.

Considering that American and coalition forces are likely to remain in Iraq through 2007, the price tag for regime change in Iraq alone will reach hundreds of billions of dollars. This money may never be recovered even if we succeed in stabilizing and rebuilding that country.

Arguably the greatest challenge facing the President's strategy is that Israel alone among the governments in the region shares his vision of Western-style democracy. Other Middle East regimes, from Iran to Syria to Saudi Arabia, have every incentive to preserve the status quo and to undermine U.S. efforts to democratize Iraq. Even Turkey, a NATO ally, has expressed serious concerns about the impact of regime change in Iraq on the future of its own Kurdish ethnic minority. Ankara

is not likely to sit still if the Kurds in northern Iraq push for independence.

The Bush strategy also has failed to set priorities for the threats facing this nation and to assign differentiated responses to them. Ten months into the Iraq war, it is still unclear whether Saddam Hussein's overthrow has done much to weaken Islamist terrorism. At the same time, the war's costs in blood and national treasure continue to grow. Worse still, the war may have transformed Iraq from a secondary threat into a premier battleground for jihadists to recruit new fighters for the war against the United States.

The issue is not that our current strategy relies too heavily on hard power, including military force. On the contrary, the Clinton administration's failure to respond more vigorously to the mounting terrorist threats in the 1990s contributed to the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001. The United States should never subordinate its national security policy and its right to self-defense to the will of international institutions such as the United Nations.

However, there is a difference be-

tween going it alone because we had no other choice, and choosing to go it alone, even in the absence of a compelling reason to wage war against a particular adversary at a particular time.

We have a right to pre-empt when threatened, but for the United States to lead a broad coalition that would share the costs in a pre-emptive campaign, we must make a convincing case that going to war is warranted. Otherwise, what we view as justified pre-emption will be interpreted by others as unjustified premeditation, with the concomitant loss of U.S. credibility internationally. This should be our most important lesson from Iraq.

Our current strategy lacks focus, treating all potential threats as equally intolerable. It commits U.S. power to intervene internationally on an unprecedented scale, but does not seek aggressively to distribute the burden in the war on terrorism among other democracies.

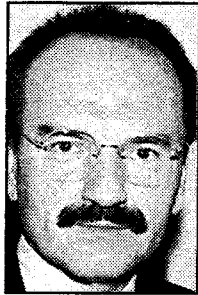
To say that we choose to go it alone because we can afford it is not a sufficient rationale. To seek a common strategy with other key states in the war against terrorism does not mean surrendering American interests to a mirage of supranational governance. After all, the Cold War was won by sharing the risks and the resources across the entire Western community.

Today we urgently need to rebuild the Western alliance around our shared mission.

As our commitment in Iraq grows, the administration needs to seek a national consensus on what reasonable threat levels the public would tolerate when measured against the cost of pre-emptive strikes.

The unfolding presidential election campaign offers a unique opportunity for both parties to engage on this issue. We need to understand which threats must be eliminated through pre-emptive action and why, and which can be effectively managed.

President Bush is right when he speaks of the long-term nature of our struggle against terrorists. That is precisely why we should tailor our strategy in a way that distributes the costs internationally, and gives the United States the necessary staying power to prevail.



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