

Democracy Now

We do not know how close the American effort in Iraq may be to irrecoverable failure. We are inclined to believe, however, that the current Washington wisdom—that the United States has already failed and there is nothing to do now but find a not-too-damaging way to extricate ourselves—is far too pessimistic, a panicked reaction to the difficulties in Falluja and with Moktada al-Sadr, as well as to the disaster of Abu Ghraib. We are also appalled at the cavalier and irresponsible way people on both left and right now suggest we should pull out and simply let Iraq go to hell. We wonder how those who, rightly, complain about the American mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners, can blithely consign the entire Iraqi population to the likely prospect of a horrific civil war and the brutal dictatorship that would follow. Spare us that kind of “humanitarianism.”

Thank goodness the president says he remains committed to victory. Thank goodness there are stalwarts like Senators Joe Biden, Joe Lieberman, and Evan Bayh in the Democratic party who are fighting against that party’s growing clamor for withdrawal. But loss of confidence that the war is winnable goes well beyond left-wing Democrats and isolationist Republicans. The Bush administration seems not to recognize how widespread, and how bipartisan, is the view that Iraq is already lost or on the verge of being lost. The administration therefore may not appreciate how close the whole nation is to tipping decisively against the war. In a sense, it doesn’t matter whether this popular and elite perception of the situation in Iraq is too simplistic and too pessimistic. The perception, if it lingers, may destroy support for the war before events on the ground have a chance to prove it wrong.

So Iraq could be lost if the Bush administration holds to the view that it can press ahead with its political and military strategy without any dramatic change of course, without taking bold and visible action to reverse the current downward trajectory. The existing Bush administration plan in Iraq is to wait for U.N. envoy Lakhdar Brahimi to name an interim Iraqi caretaker government by the end of May that will take power on July 1, and prepare for elections in January 2005. This plan might have been adequate a couple of months ago. But it is inadequate to meet the new challenge.

Among the biggest mistakes made by the Bush admin-

istration over the past year has been the failure to move Iraq more rapidly toward elections. It’s true that many, inside and outside the administration, have long been clamoring to hand over more responsibility to Iraqis, responsibility above all for doing more of the fighting and dying. But the one thing even many of these friends of Iraq have been unwilling to hand over to Iraqis is the right to choose their own government. This is a mistake.

We do not believe in the present circumstances that the current administration plan moves quickly enough toward providing Iraqis real sovereignty. It is not real sovereignty when a U.N. official tells Iraqis who their next prime minister will be. We strongly doubt that the announcement of a new interim government—three to four weeks from now, to take office almost two months from now—will have sufficient impact on Iraqi public opinion to overcome the images of American soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners. Nor do we believe the present course will give the American people and their representatives sufficient reason to hope that a corner may be turned in the near future. The coming weeks are critical.

We don’t claim to have a silver bullet. But we believe one answer to the current crisis would be to move up elections by several months, perhaps to September. The administration could announce very soon that nationwide Iraqi elections will be held on September 30. Brahimi could go ahead and announce his caretaker government, but it would be clear to all that the new government’s primary purpose was to preside over the transition to elected government—first by preparing for the elections, with the help of the United States and the international community.

Accelerating the elections would have several virtues: First, it would change the subject. Instead of focusing on their anger at Americans, Iraqis would be compelled to begin focusing on the coming elections, where each and every Iraqi adult will have a chance to participate in shaping the future. Second, with elections coming quickly, those who continued to commit violence in Iraq would be understood to be attacking not only the United States, but also the elections process, and therefore democracy. The insurgents would be antidemocratic rather than anti-American. Sunnis could be told that if they want more power, they should begin organizing for the vote. Those Sunnis who committed violence would be harming the

Sunni population's chances of fair representation, since violence that disrupts the voting could lead to nullification of the vote in the affected areas. The impending elections would encourage the majority of peaceful Sunnis and Shia to take sides against the guerrillas who seek power through force of arms instead of through the ballot.

Third, with elections pending, American military actions could be seen not just as an effort to suppress rebellious Iraqi movements but as a vital support for the elections process, and for democracy. Americans would be fighting to give Iraqis a chance to vote, soon. Fourth, and not least important, the holding of elections in Iraq within a few months might give Americans here at home greater confidence that things can be turned around in Iraq. Does it make that much difference whether elections are held in January 2005 or September 2004? In normal times, perhaps not. But these are not normal times. In terms of perception and psychology, both in Iraq and in the United States, we believe moving the elections to September can make a very big difference. As for those who rightly point out that the schedule we suggest would make for a hasty and imperfect election process and that much could go wrong, we agree. But even flawed elections in Iraq would contribute to a sense of political progress—of movement toward legitimate self-government—that would give us a chance of improving the situation.

In addition to setting a new date for elections, the administration would have to do a couple of other things. It would have to increase, substantially, the number of troops in Iraq in order to create a more secure environment

for elections. Rep. John Murtha has been attacked by Republicans for insisting that we are unlikely to succeed in Iraq without a big increase in the number of troops. These attacks on Murtha are stupid, because he is absolutely right. The Pentagon continues to fiddle while Iraq burns. Everyone in Iraq with whom we talk bemoans the shortage of troops and equipment. It is now impossible to travel safely throughout most of Iraq. This is terrible news, and would be even if we weren't preparing for an election. But if elections are announced, the Pentagon could be forced to overcome its arrogant stubbornness and beef up the force.

Finally, the administration should use the new date for elections as an opportunity to make one more run at Europe and the international community for support. It could challenge the French and Germans to send troops to Iraq not to aid our occupation but to support elections. And aside from troops, Europeans could provide vital money and technical assistance to the elections process, which must be managed with care. We believe it would be hard for Europeans to say no when asked to support a more rapid electoral process in Iraq. The Bush administration, therefore, might be able to demonstrate to the American people that it was acting with greater success to bring the international community in to help. That too would help reverse the gloom and doom here at home.

As we say, this proposal is not a cure-all. It carries its own risks as well as benefits. If someone has a better idea, we're happy to hear it. But if the administration does not take dramatic action now, it may be unable to avoid failure.

—Robert Kagan and William Kristol

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