

Bush Might Want Another Go at “Democratizing” Iraq

By Claude Salhani

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President George W. Bush is considering increasing the number of troops in the U.S. Army and Marines to help cope with the strain the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are placing on the armed forces.

But in the ever-suspicious minds of Washington insiders there is a sort of a presentiment among some observers that Bush might want to attempt one final stab at solving the Iraqi conundrum by using military means rather than give more thought to the diplomatic approach.

The generals appear mixed on this one. Bush says some support him. Others do not. Certainly, any general would like to have more troops, but on the other hand, injecting additional troops at this point in the game may be too little too late.

Why would the president choose to increase U.S. troops now when logic calls for troop reduction in Iraq? Why then undertake action that might escalate the conflict?

The answer may be found in the Iraq Study Group’s recommendations which proposes steps leading to an “honorable exit” from Iraq and a face-saving opportunity to turn away from what has become a complex – not to mention explosive – situation.

The president said he would like to pursue “all options.” And quite possibly one of those “all options” is to have one last stab at “democratizing” Iraq.

The president sees a premature withdrawal of American forces while Islamist insurgents, Sunni and Shiite militias and assorted gunmen continue to drag Iraq towards sectarian conflict as a defeat for the United States.

The president’s plan, it would seem, would be to “surge” Iraq with U.S. troops. The logic is that the superior numbers of American troops will have a better handle on the situation, all while stepping up the training program of Iraqi

forces. By the time Bush leaves the Oval Office in 2008, he would be handing to his successor a much more subdued Iraq. That is the theory.

But for that to happen Bush would need many more soldiers and Marines in Iraq. Tens of thousands more boots on the ground.

If implemented, that plan has at least two major setbacks, particularly if the president wants to see this unfold during the two years he has left before vacating the Oval Office in January 2009.

The first setback is that training new recruits is time consuming, especially when it is being carried out in the context of a larger expansion of the Army and the Marine Corps. What is required here is much more than basic training. The military will need to prepare their new recruits for the kind of warfare they can expect in Iraq. That means urban warfare – street to street and house to house fighting. This kind of training requires a minimum of six months.

Given that Bush is pressed for time he would need to redeploy troops from other areas such as Germany, the Balkans, Japan and South Korea, and redirect them to Iraq.

The second problem is that with more boots on the ground, the troops are very likely to engage in heavy combat operations, causing more damage and casualties among Iraqi civilians. This will only serve to further infuriate Iraqi, Arab and Muslim public opinion, and to build more hatred towards the United States. In short, it would be counter to everything the Baker-Hamilton report recommended.

Sending in larger number of American forces is what should have happened at the outset of the U.S. intervention in Iraq. An overwhelming military force at the start of the war would have made a big difference. They would have quite possibly prevented the breakdown of law and order. There would have been no rioting, looting or the general chaos that ensued.

But remember, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was opposed to deploying big numbers. Now, more than three years down the road, injecting several tens of thousands of additional U.S. troops into Iraq risks escalating the conflict, rather than defusing the situation.

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