

Where is the Iraq war headed next?

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In recent weeks, there has been widespread speculation that President George W. Bush, confronted by diminishing approval ratings and dissent within his own party, will begin pulling American troops out of Iraq next year. The Administration's best-case scenario is that the parliamentary election scheduled for December 15th will produce a coalition government that will join the Administration in calling for a withdrawal to begin in the spring. By then, the White House hopes, the new government will be capable of handling the insurgency. In a speech on November 19th, Bush repeated the latest Administration catchphrase: "As Iraqis stand up, we will stand down." He added, "When our commanders on the ground tell me that Iraqi forces can defend their freedom, our troops will come home with the honor they have earned." One sign of the political pressure on the Administration to prepare for a withdrawal came last week, when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told Fox News that the current level of American troops would not have to be maintained "for very much longer," because the Iraqis were getting better at fighting the insurgency.

A high-level Pentagon war planner told me, however, that he has seen scant indication that the President would authorize a significant pullout of American troops if he believed that it would impede the war against the insurgency. There are several proposals currently under review by the White House and the Pentagon; the most ambitious calls for American combat forces to be reduced from a hundred and fifty-five thousand troops to fewer than eighty thousand by next fall, with all American forces officially designated "combat" to be pulled out of the area by the summer of 2008. In terms of implementation, the planner said, "the drawdown plans that I'm familiar with are condition-based, event-driven, and not in a specific time frame"—that is, they depend on the ability of a new Iraqi government to defeat the insurgency. (A Pentagon spokesman said that the Administration had not made any decisions and had "no plan to leave, only a plan to complete the mission.")

A key element of the drawdown plans, not mentioned in the President's public statements, is that the departing American troops will be replaced by American airpower. Quick, deadly strikes by U.S. warplanes are seen as a way to improve dramatically the combat capability of even the weakest Iraqi combat units. The danger, military experts have told me, is that, while the number of American casualties would decrease as ground troops are withdrawn, the over-all level of violence and the number of Iraqi fatalities would increase unless there are stringent controls over who bombs what.

"We're not planning to diminish the war," Patrick Clawson, the deputy director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told me. Clawson's views often mirror the thinking of the men and women around Vice-President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. "We just want to change the mix of the forces doing the fighting—Iraqi infantry with American support and greater use of airpower. The rule now is to commit Iraqi forces into combat only in places where they are sure to win. The pace of commitment, and

withdrawal, depends on their success in the battlefield.”

He continued, “We want to draw down our forces, but the President is prepared to tough this one out. There is a very deep feeling on his part that the issue of Iraq was settled by the American people at the polling places in 2004.” The war against the insurgency “may end up being a nasty and murderous civil war in Iraq, but we and our allies would still win,” he said. “As long as the Kurds and the Shiites stay on our side, we’re set to go. There’s no sense that the world is caving in. We’re in the middle of a seven-year slog in Iraq, and eighty per cent of the Iraqis are receptive to our message.”

One Pentagon adviser told me, “There are always contingency plans, but why withdraw and take a chance? I don’t think the President will go for it”—until the insurgency is broken. “He’s not going to back off. This is bigger than domestic politics.”



Current and former military and intelligence officials have told me that the President remains convinced that it is his personal mission to bring democracy to Iraq, and that he is impervious to political pressure, even from fellow Republicans. They also say that he disparages any information that conflicts with his view of how the war is proceeding.

Bush’s closest advisers have long been aware of the religious nature of his policy commitments. In recent interviews, one former senior official, who served in Bush’s first term, spoke extensively about the connection between the President’s religious faith and his view of the war in Iraq. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the former official said, he was told that Bush felt that “God put me here” to deal with the war on terror. The President’s belief was fortified by the Republican sweep in the 2002 congressional elections; Bush saw the victory as a purposeful message from God that “he’s the man,” the former official said. Publicly, Bush depicted his reelection as a referendum on the war; privately, he spoke of it as another manifestation of divine purpose.

The former senior official said that after the election he made a lengthy inspection visit to Iraq and reported his findings to Bush in the White House: “I said to the President, ‘We’re not winning the war.’ And he asked, ‘Are we losing?’ I said, ‘Not yet.’ ” The President, he said, “appeared displeased” with that answer.

“I tried to tell him,” the former senior official said. “And he couldn’t hear it.”

There are grave concerns within the military about the capability of the U.S. Army to sustain two or three more years of combat in Iraq. Michael O’Hanlon, a specialist on military issues at the Brookings Institution, told me, “The people in the institutional Army feel they don’t have the luxury of deciding troop levels, or even participating in the debate. They’re planning on staying the course until 2009. I can’t believe the Army thinks that it will happen, because there’s no sustained drive to increase the size of the regular Army.” O’Hanlon noted that “if the President decides to stay the present course in Iraq some troops would be compelled to serve fourth and fifth tours of combat by 2007 and 2008, which could have serious consequences for morale and competency levels.”

Many of the military’s most senior generals are deeply frustrated, but they say nothing in public, because they don’t want to jeopardize their careers. The Administration has “so terrified the generals that they know they won’t go public,” a former defense official said. A retired senior C.I.A. officer with knowledge of Iraq told me that one of his colleagues recently

participated in a congressional tour there. The legislators were repeatedly told, in meetings with enlisted men, junior officers, and generals that “things were fucked up.” But in a subsequent teleconference with Rumsfeld, he said, the generals kept those criticisms to themselves.

One person with whom the Pentagon’s top commanders have shared their private views for decades is Representative John Murtha, of Pennsylvania, the senior Democrat on the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. The President and his key aides were enraged when, on November 17th, Murtha gave a speech in the House calling for a withdrawal of troops within six months. The speech was filled with devastating information. For example, Murtha reported that the number of attacks in Iraq has increased from a hundred and fifty a week to more than seven hundred a week in the past year. He said that an estimated fifty thousand American soldiers will suffer “from what I call battle fatigue” in the war, and he said that the Americans were seen as “the common enemy” in Iraq. He also took issue with one of the White House’s claims—that foreign fighters were playing the major role in the insurgency. Murtha said that American soldiers “haven’t captured any in this latest activity”—the continuing battle in western Anbar province, near the border with Syria. “So this idea that they’re coming in from outside, we still think there’s only seven per cent.”

Murtha’s call for a speedy American pullout only seemed to strengthen the White House’s resolve. Administration officials “are beyond angry at him, because he is a serious threat to their policy—both on substance and politically,” the former defense official said. Speaking at the Osan Air Force base, in South Korea, two days after Murtha’s speech, Bush said, “The terrorists regard Iraq as the central front in their war against humanity. . . . If they’re not stopped, the terrorists will be able to advance their agenda to develop weapons of mass destruction, to destroy Israel, to intimidate Europe, and to break our will and blackmail our government into isolation. I’m going to make you this commitment: this is not going to happen on my watch.”

“The President is more determined than ever to stay the course,” the former defense official said. “He doesn’t feel any pain. Bush is a believer in the adage ‘People may suffer and die, but the Church advances.’ ” He said that the President had become more detached, leaving more issues to Karl Rove and Vice-President Cheney. “They keep him in the gray world of religious idealism, where he wants to be anyway,” the former defense official said. Bush’s public appearances, for example, are generally scheduled in front of friendly audiences, most often at military bases. Four decades ago, President Lyndon Johnson, who was also confronted with an increasingly unpopular war, was limited to similar public forums. “Johnson knew he was a prisoner in the White House,” the former official said, “but Bush has no idea.”



Within the military, the prospect of using airpower as a substitute for American troops on the ground has caused great unease. For one thing, Air Force commanders, in particular, have deep-seated objections to the possibility that Iraqis eventually will be responsible for target selection. “Will the Iraqis call in air strikes in order to snuff rivals, or other warlords, or to snuff members of your own sect and blame someone else?” another senior military planner now on assignment in the Pentagon asked. “Will some Iraqis be targeting on behalf of Al Qaeda, or the insurgency, or the Iranians?”

“It’s a serious business,” retired Air Force General Charles Horner, who was in charge of allied bombing during the 1991 Gulf War, said. “The Air Force has always had concerns about people ordering air strikes who are not Air Force forward air controllers. We need people on active duty to think it out, and they will. There has to be training to be sure that somebody is not trying to get even with somebody else.” (Asked for a comment, the Pentagon spokesman said there were plans in place for such training. He also noted that Iraq had no offensive airpower of its own, and thus would have to rely on the United States for some time.)

The American air war inside Iraq today is perhaps the most significant—and underreported—aspect of the fight against the insurgency. The military authorities in Baghdad and Washington do not provide the press with a daily accounting of missions that Air Force, Navy, and Marine units fly or of the tonnage they drop, as was routinely done during the Vietnam War. One insight into the scope of the bombing in Iraq was supplied by the Marine Corps during the height of the siege of Falluja in the fall of 2004. “With a massive Marine air and ground offensive under way,” a Marine press release said, “Marine close air support continues to put high-tech steel on target. . . . Flying missions day and night for weeks, the fixed wing aircraft of the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing are ensuring battlefield success on the front line.” Since the beginning of the war, the press release said, the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing alone had dropped more than five hundred thousand tons of ordnance. “This number is likely to be much higher by the end of operations,” Major Mike Sexton said. In the battle for the city, more than seven hundred Americans were killed or wounded; U.S. officials did not release estimates of civilian dead, but press reports at the time told of women and children killed in the bombardments.

In recent months, the tempo of American bombing seems to have increased. Most of the targets appear to be in the hostile, predominantly Sunni provinces that surround Baghdad and along the Syrian border. As yet, neither Congress nor the public has engaged in a significant discussion or debate about the air war.

The insurgency operates mainly in crowded urban areas, and Air Force warplanes rely on sophisticated, laser-guided bombs to avoid civilian casualties. These bombs home in on targets that must be “painted,” or illuminated, by laser beams directed by ground units. “The pilot doesn’t identify the target as seen in the pre-brief”—the instructions provided before takeoff—a former high-level intelligence official told me. “The guy with the laser is the targeteer. Not the pilot. Often you get a ‘hot-read’ ”—from a military unit on the ground—“and you drop your bombs with no communication with the guys on the ground. You don’t want to break radio silence. The people on the ground are calling in targets that the pilots can’t verify.” He added, “And we’re going to turn this process over to the Iraqis?”

The second senior military planner told me that there are essentially two types of targeting now being used in Iraq: a deliberate site-selection process that works out of air-operations centers in the region, and “adaptive targeting”—supportive bombing by prepositioned or loitering warplanes that are suddenly alerted to firefights or targets of opportunity by military units on the ground. “The bulk of what we do today is adaptive,” the officer said, “and it’s divorced from any operational air planning. Airpower can be used as a tool of internal political coercion, and my attitude is that I can’t imagine that we will give that power to the Iraqis.”

This military planner added that even today, with Americans doing the targeting, “there is no sense of an air campaign, or a strategic vision. We are just whacking targets—it’s a

reversion to the Stone Age. There's no operational art. That's what happens when you give targeting to the Army—they hit what the local commander wants to hit."

One senior Pentagon consultant I spoke to said he was optimistic that "American air will immediately make the Iraqi Army that much better." But he acknowledged that he, too, had concerns about Iraqi targeting. "We have the most expensive eyes in the sky right now," the consultant said. "But a lot of Iraqis want to settle old scores. Who is going to have authority to call in air strikes? There's got to be a behavior-based rule."

General John Jumper, who retired last month after serving four years as the Air Force chief of staff, was "in favor of certification of those Iraqis who will be allowed to call in strikes," the Pentagon consultant told me. "I don't know if it will be approved. The regular Army generals were resisting it to the last breath, despite the fact that they would benefit the most from it."

A Pentagon consultant with close ties to the officials in the Vice-President's office and the Pentagon who advocated the war said that the Iraqi penchant for targeting tribal and personal enemies with artillery and mortar fire had created "impatience and resentment" inside the military. He believed that the Air Force's problems with Iraqi targeting might be addressed by the formation of U.S.-Iraqi transition teams, whose American members would be drawn largely from Special Forces troops. This consultant said that there were plans to integrate between two hundred and three hundred Special Forces members into Iraqi units, which was seen as a compromise aimed at meeting the Air Force's demand to vet Iraqis who were involved in targeting. But in practice, the consultant added, it meant that "the Special Ops people will soon allow Iraqis to begin calling in the targets."

Robert Pape, a political-science professor at the University of Chicago, who has written widely on American airpower, and who taught for three years at the Air Force's School of Advanced Airpower Studies, in Alabama, predicted that the air war "will get very ugly" if targeting is turned over to the Iraqis. This would be especially true, he said, if the Iraqis continued to operate as the U.S. Army and Marines have done—plowing through Sunni strongholds on search-and-destroy missions. "If we encourage the Iraqis to clear and hold their own areas, and use airpower to stop the insurgents from penetrating the cleared areas, it could be useful," Pape said. "The risk is that we will encourage the Iraqis to do search-and-destroy, and they would be less judicious about using airpower—and the violence would go up. More civilians will be killed, which means more insurgents will be created."

Even American bombing on behalf of an improved, well-trained Iraqi Army would not necessarily be any more successful against the insurgency. "It's not going to work," said Andrew Brookes, the former director of airpower studies at the Royal Air Force's advanced staff college, who is now at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, in London. "Can you put a lid on the insurgency with bombing?" Brookes said. "No. You can concentrate in one area, but the guys will spring up in another town." The inevitable reliance on Iraqi ground troops' targeting would also create conflicts. "I don't see your guys dancing to the tune of someone else," Brookes said. He added that he and many other experts "don't believe that airpower is a solution to the problems inside Iraq at all. Replacing boots on the ground with airpower didn't work in Vietnam, did it?"



The Air Force's worries have been subordinated, so far, to the political needs of the White House. The Administration's immediate political goal after the December elections is to show that the day-to-day conduct of the war can be turned over to the newly trained and equipped Iraqi military. It has already planned heavily scripted change-of-command ceremonies, complete with the lowering of American flags at bases and the raising of Iraqi ones.

Some officials in the State Department, the C.I.A., and British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government have settled on their candidate of choice for the December elections—Iyad Allawi, the secular Shiite who served until this spring as Iraq's interim Prime Minister. They believe that Allawi can gather enough votes in the election to emerge, after a round of political bargaining, as Prime Minister. A former senior British adviser told me that Blair was convinced that Allawi "is the best hope." The fear is that a government dominated by religious Shiites, many of whom are close to Iran, would give Iran greater political and military influence inside Iraq. Allawi could counter Iran's influence; also, he would be far more supportive and cooperative if the Bush Administration began a drawdown of American combat forces in the coming year.

Blair has assigned a small team of operatives to provide political help to Allawi, the former adviser told me. He also said that there was talk late this fall, with American concurrence, of urging Ahmad Chalabi, a secular Shiite, to join forces in a coalition with Allawi during the post-election negotiations to form a government. Chalabi, who is notorious for his role in promoting flawed intelligence on weapons of mass destruction before the war, is now a deputy Prime Minister. He and Allawi were bitter rivals while in exile.


A senior United Nations diplomat told me that he was puzzled by the high American and British hopes for Allawi. "I know a lot of people want Allawi, but I think he's been a terrific disappointment," the diplomat said. "He doesn't seem to be building a strong alliance, and at the moment it doesn't look like he will do very well in the election."

The second Pentagon consultant told me, "If Allawi becomes Prime Minister, we can say, 'There's a moderate, urban, educated leader now in power who does not want to deprive women of their rights.' He would ask us to leave, but he would allow us to keep Special Forces operations inside Iraq—to keep an American presence the right way. Mission accomplished. A coup for Bush."

A former high-level intelligence official cautioned that it was probably "too late" for any American withdrawal plan to work without further bloodshed. The constitution approved by Iraqi voters in October "will be interpreted by the Kurds and the Shiites to proceed with their plans for autonomy," he said. "The Sunnis will continue to believe that if they can get rid of the Americans they can still win. And there still is no credible way to establish security for American troops."

The fear is that a precipitous U.S. withdrawal would inevitably trigger a Sunni-Shiite civil war. In many areas, that war has, in a sense, already begun, and the United States military is being drawn into the sectarian violence. An American Army officer who took part in the assault on Tal Afar, in the north of Iraq, earlier this fall, said that an American infantry brigade was placed in the position of providing a cordon of security around the besieged city for Iraqi forces, most of them Shiites, who were "rounding up any Sunnis on the basis of whatever a Shiite said to them." The officer went on, "They were killing Sunnis on behalf of the Shiites," with the active participation of a militia unit led by a retired American Special

Forces soldier. "People like me have gotten so downhearted," the officer added.

Meanwhile, as the debate over troop reductions continues, the covert war in Iraq has expanded in recent months to Syria. A composite American Special Forces team, known as an S.M.U., for "special-mission unit," has been ordered, under stringent cover, to target suspected supporters of the Iraqi insurgency across the border. (The Pentagon had no comment.) "It's a powder keg," the Pentagon consultant said of the tactic. "But, if we hit an insurgent network in Iraq without hitting the guys in Syria who are part of it, the guys in Syria would get away. When you're fighting an insurgency, you have to strike everywhere—and at once." 

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