

Stagecraft, Not Statecraft: Diagnosing Bush's Failure in Iraq

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From "Mission Accomplished" to his September trip to Anbar province, President Bush has excelled at stagecraft when it comes to Iraq. Pulling rabbits out of hats and waving scarves like a diplomatic David Copperfield, he has staged events and shaped imagery to build support for his strategies, while undercutting his critics at crucial moments. Political stagecraft can be an important part of statecraft, insofar as it helps sustain policies. But stagecraft without statecraft is just smoke and mirrors. And the Bush administration has pursued the former while neglecting the latter.

Statecraft is following clear objectives that are also married to the means of their own fulfillment; while stagecraft is inflating the objectives for rhetorical use while totally ignoring the means. From the very outset in Iraq, the administration has never managed to make objectives add up with means. With the supposed weapons of mass destruction, for example, the administration talked up the threat, creating an objective massive enough to pull us into war. But it didn't commit enough troops to seize all the reputed sites of WMD, much less prevent the WMD materials from being smuggled out of the country if they had been there. The objective became all -- the means were forgotten about.

Once in Iraq, the administration continued its mismatch of objectives and means. Displacing Saddam Hussein was very significant, but the administration neglected to consider that a political decapitation might create a vacuum that would be filled by chaos, not stability. Donald Rumsfeld planned to draw troops down right away, going from 160,000 to 30,000 in a matter of months -- the expectations being that, with Saddam out, Iraq would somehow magically (the rabbit in the hat again) become peaceful. The objective of stabilizing Iraq was talked up and talked up, but the means they chose -- getting rid of Saddam -- simply wasn't enough.

The recent surge, too, exemplifies the extent to which the Administration tends to ignore the statecraft prerequisite of tying objectives and means together. The objective of the surge was to convince Iraqi sectarian leaders to make fundamental political compromises; the means was to provide them with security that would act as an inducement to forge a new national compact. Unfortunately, the compromises expected from the Iraqis are just too big, and the security offered isn't enough to change that. For the Shia, who, despite their larger numbers, have always been

treated as an underclass, there is a deep conviction that the Sunnis will never accept their newly dominant political and economic position. As such, the Shia are a majority who fear they can lose power at any moment -- and are, thus, not prepared to share it. The Sunnis are aware of this, and, moreover, their historic and emotional aversion to the Shia remains unchanged. Sunni tribal leaders, even some of those who are working with us, refer to the Iraqi Shia as the "Persians" -- not a good sign that they'll be willing to throw down arms and join as brothers.

Without stronger means -- a way to force the Iraqis into political compromise -- the objective of the surge will never be reached. How has Bush responded to this? By, nine months later, redefining the surge's objective -- apparently, now, the surge is about political empowerment on a local level, not national conciliation. "As local politics change, so will national politics," Bush has said more than once. But he hasn't declared the means for accomplishing this, and it will not be an easy task. The more we succeed in creating local empowerment, the more each group will bump up against the others. Who will define the boundaries between them? Tactical military successes may build us partners, but they aren't joining Iraqis together; on the contrary, a Sunni who was joining the very local auxiliary forces that we are now promoting told New York Times reporters that "we will fight the government until the very last bullet." Not surprisingly, the large Shia faction in the governing coalition, the United Iraqi Alliance, has now condemned our policy of building up local forces. Again, the Bush administration has tossed out a seemingly plausible objective while providing few ideas for how to reach it. This is another illusion, stagecraft without statecraft.

So what, exactly, would statecraft look like in Iraq now? How can we define our objectives based on the means currently available to us? It's a vitally important question. To start, one must consider where Iraq is likely to be in ten or even 15 years time -- and then think about the best way to get there. As Senator Joe Biden and Leslie Gelb of the Council on Foreign Relations have argued, Iraq will probably end up with a central government possessing very limited powers, provinces that have far-reaching autonomy, and some means for sharing revenues among them. Iraq will either reach this state through a process of exhaustion after a prolonged and bloody civil war -- one that will probably drag in its neighbors -- or through a managed transition. We may just be too late for a managed transition at this point, but it is still an important objective; the fallback must be containment.

As for means, we have three potentially complementary options. The first is to use withdrawal as a lever. Tell the Maliki government and all other groups that we are going to withdraw but we will give them the option of affecting how, when, and where we do so. For those Iraqi groups that are prepared to cooperate with us and each other, we will withdraw the way they prefer us to do so and we will provide them with military and economic means as a reward. For those who refuse to cooperate, we will do the opposite of what they want on withdrawal and they will see their internal adversaries benefit.

The second is to set up a national accommodation conference, including those we are empowering at the local level and the national leaders, and basically lock everyone in a room together until they come to an agreement. At the very least, this could help connect the local areas and the central government.

Finally, we need to address Iraq's neighbors differently by, for example, brokering understandings between the surrounding countries -- especially Saudi Arabia and Iran -- so that, at the minimum we can keep the conflict from spreading. The Iranians will not help us get out of Iraq, but they have their own reasons for not wanting U.S. forces to withdraw any time soon: A U.S. withdrawal could leave a vacuum that would suck Iran and Saudi Arabia into an infinite and miserable competition. Knowing that, we have a shot at convincing them to help contain the violence.

Working these three pathways simultaneously, and in coordination with our military efforts could unite the objective and means of the surge, leading to a political solution as well as a military one. Even the Bush administration will have to acknowledge that stagecraft has failed us as an Iraq policy. Isn't it time to try some statecraft?

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and

author of [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](#)

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>).

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