

Personal Effects

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Articles & Testimony

Last night President Bush offered a firm response to those who advocate American withdrawal from Iraq. “To retreat before victory would be an act of recklessness and dishonor,” he said, “and I will not allow it.” He also refused to set a timetable for withdrawal, saying, “I will make decisions on troop levels based on the progress we see on the ground and the advice of our military leaders.” Bush is right that an immediate pullout would be a mistake. But the problem with both promises is that Bush is not in a position to personally guarantee them. He can’t guarantee the first pledge because America’s military presence in Iraq will likely continue past his final day in office. And he can’t alone guarantee the second because the Iraqi government will want a say over when U.S. troops begin leaving the country.

Can the U.S. military’s role really end by January 2009? It seems unlikely. Consider the all-important handover of security responsibilities to Iraqi forces. Completing the rebuilding of the Iraqi army in three years will be a difficult task. Efforts to date have concentrated on forming light infantry units, but an army also needs heavier combat units like armor and artillery, plus the whole network of logistics units that make the force ready to fight. If all goes well, those units might be in place by the time Bush leaves office, although substantial U.S. advisory assistance will almost certainly still be needed. But there is zero possibility that Iraq will have a fully functioning air force by January 2009. Air power is an underappreciated part of the counterinsurgency effort in Iraq. Among other things, it allows coalition forces to transport troops quickly and attack insurgent concentrations from above. The close air support of ground units at which American forces excel requires years of training; and to date this has not been the focus of the nascent Iraqi Air Force, which has concentrated instead on transport.

It would be a great gamble to assume that by January 2009 the insurgency will be weak enough for the United States to cease all military activities in Iraq, leaving the new Iraqi forces to function on their own without American advisors, logistics support, or air power. Perhaps the United States can provide those functions with forces stationed outside Iraq, for instance, in the Army’s Camp Arifjan in Kuwait or the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. But even in that case, America will have to continue to be militarily involved in Iraq long after Bush leaves the White House—otherwise we will indeed have retreated before achieving victory.

Unfortunately there is much reason for the insurgents to hope, and the U.S. military to worry, that the next president and future Congresses will not be willing to provide continuing assistance, even though it would be a rather small commitment—quite possibly on the scale of the current American effort in Afghanistan. The great quandary Bush faces is that his legacy—the outcome of the Iraq war—will depend in no small part on the choices made by his successor. Shaping the political environment to lock his successor into completing this project will not be an easy task.

As for the president’s other promise—“I will make decisions on troop levels based on the progress we see on the ground and the advice of our military leaders”—it is by no means clear that Bush and Bush alone will make decisions on troop levels. Not only does Congress think it has a role, but so does the Iraqi government. Bush may find it militarily useful, and quite possibly politically expedient, to formulate the conditions for a reduction of American

forces in such vague terms; but Iraqi leaders may need more explicit formulations to address the concerns of their constituents and to demonstrate that the new government is gaining strength.

Many disaffected Iraqi voices whom Baghdad and Washington would like to draw into the orbit of electoral politics have called for a U.S. withdrawal—among them, Muqtada al-Sadr and various Sunni politicians sympathetic to the insurgents. In February the Arab League will sponsor a conference of Iraqis inside and outside government designed to promote reconciliation between the new Baghdad authorities and their domestic opponents. This meeting will almost certainly prompt calls for a U.S. departure; after all, the November preliminary meeting in Cairo produced a demand for “the withdrawal of foreign troops in accordance with a timetable and upon the prompt initiation of a national programme to rebuild the armed forces.” It is noteworthy that this statement was made by a conference that included Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari. To be sure, the Arab League’s efforts can be, and usually are, ignored. But the same issue of a timetable for drawing down American forces is almost certain to be raised by some Iraqi parties in the negotiations over the new parliament’s election of the presidential triumvirate. Not only does that election require a two-thirds majority of parliament, but there will be substantial political pressure to include the principal Arab Sunni parties, which will want to show that they got something in the negotiations. And what greater prize than a time frame for U.S. withdrawal?

All of which means that there will soon be substantial pressure from Iraq to develop a timetable for reducing the U.S. presence. And it would be best if Washington took the initiative and made a proposal rather than allowing Baghdad to appear to be pushing us out. For one thing, a preemptive American proposal could make clear that a gradual reduction in American forces extending over many years, not an immediate withdrawal, is the smartest option. Moreover, such a proposal could seek to tie the schedule for U.S. withdrawal to progress made, not the calendar. “Our forces in Iraq are on the road to victory,” Bush said last night, “and that is the road that will take them home.” But to achieve victory, the president might first have to acknowledge that he isn’t in complete control.

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