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"Staying the Course" Isn't an Option

Iraq is probably already lost, says former military-policy planner Mike Turner. But there are still some smart strategies for Kerry to adopt

WEB-EXCLUSIVE COMMENTARY

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Sept. 24 - One of the great mysteries of this election is the inability of John Kerry to challenge George W. Bush on his national-security credentials and to hold his administration accountable for its monumental failure in Iraq. These two issues remain the soft underbelly of the Bush campaign. That the Kerry campaign hasn't effectively exploited them is disheartening. That he's allowed Bush to actually spin them into strengths is mind-boggling. Since the American people seem to be buying the GOP's reality-TV version of events in Iraq, let's take a hard look at the military realities.

From a purely military standpoint, the war in Iraq is an unmitigated disaster. This administration failed to make even a cursory effort at adequately defining the political end state they sought to achieve by removing Saddam Hussein, making it impossible to precisely define long-term military success. That, in turn, makes it impossible to lay out a rational exit strategy for U.S. troops. Like Vietnam, the military is again being asked to clean up the detritus of a failed foreign policy. We are nose-deep in a protracted insurgency, an occupying Christian power in an oil-rich, Arab country. That country is not now and has never been a single nation. A single, unified, democratic Iraq comprised of Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis is a willfully ignorant illusion at best.

Two thirds of America's combat brigades are now tied down in this war which, under present conditions, is categorically unwinnable. Having alienated virtually every major ally who might help, our troops are simply targets. If Bush is re-elected, there are only two possible outcomes in Iraq: # Four years from now, America will have 5,000 dead servicemen and women and an untold number of dead Iraqis at a cost of about \$1 trillion, yet still be no closer to success than we are right now, or # The U.S. will be gone, and we will witness the birth of a violent breeding ground for Shiite terrorists posing a far greater threat to Americans than a contained Saddam.

To discern the truth about Iraq, Americans must simply look beyond the spin. This war is not some noble endeavor, some great struggle of good against evil as the Bush administration would have us believe. We in the military have heard these grand pronouncements many times before by men who have neither served nor sacrificed. This war is an exercise in colossal stupidity and hubris which has now cost more than 1,000 American military lives, which has empowered Al Qaeda beyond anything those butchers might have engineered on their own and which has diverted America's attention and precious resources from the real threat at the worst possible time. And now, in a supreme act of truly

breathhtaking gall, this administration insists the only way to fix Iraq is to leave in power the very ones who created the nightmare.

Absent an unequivocal plan from Kerry, the Bush administration's "stay the course" strategy has become the de facto solution. Yet this is a recipe for even greater tragedy, setting the stage for far more crippling attacks on Americans. It means adhering to a plan that may very soon make it impossible for the U.S. to respond to significant threats from elsewhere against its vital strategic interests. The administration's policies are tearing down America's military readiness worldwide, while ignoring the real war on terror.

So what strategies should candidate Kerry propose? The first steps are patently obvious to anyone who has worked even briefly as a military policy planner. First, Americans must understand it is highly probable that Iraq is already lost. Americans must stop believing the never-ending litany of "happy thoughts" spewing forth from the Bush campaign and start thinking about our men and women dying wholesale in Iraq. Having acknowledged that painful reality and the genuine, long-term danger posed to Americans by remaining in Iraq, here are some obvious actions for Kerry to propose at his first debate next week with Bush.

1. Define the political end state. A "free and democratic Iraq" is not a realistic political goal. A loose coalition of Kurdistan (Kurds), a Central Arab Republic (Sunni) and a Southern Arab Republic (Shia) might be. Whatever the goal, the political objective must precede the military objective, and it must be forged by the experts at the State Department, not the Pentagon.

2. Given a precisely defined political objective, the president must obtain an accurate and honest field assessment from our senior military commanders, who must be free to make that assessment without recrimination. These commanders must decide if a military mission supporting the precisely defined political objective is possible and realistic. If it is, we need to enter Iraq with overwhelming military force to achieve success. If our military leaders determine it is not—and I believe that is very likely—we must pull our troops out now. Under Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, a renowned autocrat and micromanager, this type of honest assessment by the military is impossible.

3. We must obtain United Nations mandate for a long-term solution to Iraq. The U.N. may be largely impotent, inefficient and ineffectual, but it has become the basis for legitimizing military operations around the world. Since the case for defending ourselves against a supposedly imminent threat is now dead—if it ever was alive—we must obtain international, political top cover for all future operations.

4. We must obtain the support of our allies for a newly crafted, long-term political solution for the region. This will enable us to share the burden of rebuilding Iraq, though it may require some big sticks and even bigger carrots.

If the Bush administration remains in power, failure in Iraq is a virtual certainty. "Staying the course" during a crisis spiraling rapidly downward will cost thousands of American and Iraqi lives, will continue to sap the operational readiness of this nation's armed

forces, and will continue to strengthen Al Qaeda's hand. To paraphrase FDR, it's time to change horses. The one we're on is about to drown.

Retired Air Force Col. Mike Turner is a former military planner who served on the U.S. Central Command planning staff for operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Before retiring in 1997, he spent four years as a strategic policy planner for the Joint Chiefs of Staff specializing in Middle East/Africa affairs. He is a 1973 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy and a former fighter pilot and air-rescue helicopter pilot.

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