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Tallying the Dead in Iraq

The American intervention in Iraq has reached a disheartening milestone. With the death of an American soldier yesterday in an ambush outside Baghdad, more American military men and women have now died in the postwar period than perished during the war itself. That grim statistic mocks President Bush's triumphant appearance aboard the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln on May 1, when he declared an end to major combat operations. More important, it makes clear that the United States will pay a high price in blood and treasure if the Bush administration persists in its misguided effort to pacify and rebuild Iraq without extensive international support.

Giving a greater role to the United Nations and recruiting thousands of foreign soldiers to help patrol Iraq would not relieve the United States of its obligations or extinguish the dangers that American forces face. But these steps would make the postwar occupation more manageable and give the Iraqi people a sense that their country is not turning into an American outpost in the Arab world. It might also make Americans more willing to support the long-term commitment that will be needed to transform Iraq into a modern, democratic and prosperous state.

By invading Iraq without a clear-cut mandate from the United Nations Security Council, Washington all but guaranteed that an American military victory would be followed by a predominantly American occupation, with all the disadvantages that entails. The White House compounded the problem by leaving postwar planning and administration largely in the hands of the Defense Department, elbowing aside the State Department, the U. N. and private relief organizations. The Pentagon was woefully unprepared for the collapse of law and order, the breakdown of basic services and the difficulties of moving a society from tyranny to democracy.

To turn things around, Mr. Bush needs to enlist help from more experienced officials in Washington and at the U.N. That will not be easy for an administration that openly advertises its contempt for the U.N. The White House should accept a new Security Council resolution broadening U.N. political and economic authority, enabling other countries to make substantial contributions to an international peacekeeping force. The administration should also be honest about the investment — American and international — required to rebuild Iraq.

A stable peace in Iraq cannot be won on the cheap or absent foreign partners. With the death count mounting daily, it is time for Mr. Bush to stop pretending otherwise.

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