

Rudderless in Iraq

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Anyone looking for new thinking on Iraq, or even candor, had to be disappointed by President Bush's news conference yesterday. Mr. Bush may want to defer unveiling his new strategy, but there will be no obliging pause in Iraq's unraveling.

The latest Pentagon status report confirms a spiraling death toll, ever deeper sectarian divisions and near total lawlessness on the streets of Baghdad, despite repeated American vows to secure the capital. In a further sign of Iraq's descent, our colleague James Glanz reported this week that Baghdad gets less than seven hours of electricity a day, as insurgents and looters dismantle the power grid.

While Mr. Bush contemplates his fast-disappearing options, competing factions in the administration and the military have been less reticent about floating their ideas. Some urge a sharp, temporary increase in American troop strength in Baghdad. Others argue that Iraqi forces should take the lead, whether or not they're ready. Still others talk about different ways of reconfiguring Iraq's dysfunctional governing coalition.

The problem is not so much with the specific proposals — some deserve serious consideration — as with the illusion that the political and military components of American policy can be pursued in isolation from each other. That is the kind of made-in-Washington tunnel vision that produced the current disaster. Only a political strategy, embraced by Iraqis themselves and backed by American military muscle, can have even a remote chance of altering events, and even that may be too late.

Consider the talk of a temporary escalation of American forces to impose some order in Baghdad. That is guaranteed to fail, unless it is tightly integrated with a political strategy for producing an Iraqi government finally willing to move against Shiite militias and open a dialogue on national reconciliation. Without that, any temporary increase could slide seamlessly into a permanent escalation — something America's depleted ground forces cannot handle — with no chance of containing the chaos.

And while American diplomats report hints that Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, might be willing to support a genuine national unity government, it remains unclear whether he would countenance any loss of power for Shiite fundamentalists — and whether Washington has any leverage left to influence his decision.

Yesterday, Mr. Bush acknowledged the obvious and desperate need to rebuild America's overstretched ground forces, a subject he refrained from talking about so long as Donald Rumsfeld ran the Pentagon. But that will take time and won't be any help in Iraq. Mr. Bush also needs to acknowledge that his course there has reached a dead end. He needs to quickly define a new direction while he still has any choices left.

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