

Picking Up the Pieces

- [E-Mail](#)
- [Print](#)
- [Single Page](#)
- [Save](#)
- [Share](#)
 - [Digg](#)
 - [Facebook](#)
 - [Newsvine](#)
 - [Permalink](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY



Published: January 14, 2007

It was surreal how disconnected President Bush was the other night, both from Iraq's horrifying reality and America's anguish over this unnecessary, mismanaged and now unwinnable war. Indeed, most Americans seem far ahead of the president. They understand that what the country urgently needs is for Mr. Bush to chart a way out of Iraq that also limits the chaos that will be left behind.

The president's disconnect goes far to explain the harshly critical reaction of Congress and the public to his plan to further bleed America's overstretched forces by sending some 20,000 additional troops in an attempt to impose peace on Baghdad's vengeful streets. He proposes to do that without any enforceable commitments from the Iraqi government that it will take the necessary political steps that are the only hope for tamping down a spiraling civil war.

There are no really satisfying answers in Iraq, since all of the remaining options are bad. Still, some are notably worse than others, and Mr. Bush has come up with possibly the worst. He would mortgage thousands more American lives and what remains of Washington's credibility in the region to a destructively sectarian Shiite government that he seems unwilling or unable to influence or restrain.

•

Unlike Mr. Bush's views on the American military presence in Iraq, our views have evolved as the evident realities on the ground have changed. At the outset, although we opposed Mr. Bush's invasion, we hoped the United States military could provide enough security to allow an elected government to build the foundations of national unity and eventual democracy.

As it became increasingly clear that Iraqi political leaders had other, less noble intentions, we still hoped that a substantial American military presence could be used to shield innocent civilians from the growing violence, train reliable and professional Iraqi security forces to take over that task, and exert leverage on Iraqi leaders to follow a less divisive and destructive course.

Now, with Mr. Bush unwilling or unable to persuade Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki to take the minimum steps necessary to justify any deeper American commitment, we recognize that even that has become unrealistic. Mr. Maliki gave the latest White House plan an even chillier reception than it received in the United States Congress, boycotting a Thursday news conference in Baghdad announcing it. He apparently would have preferred to see American forces sent to fight Sunni insurgents in western Anbar Province, leaving Baghdad as a free-fire zone for his Shiite militia partners.

But even knowing all that, America cannot simply wash its hands of Iraq and go home. The region's problems, many of them made worse by this war, are unavoidably America's problems as well. For starters, Iraq is in imminent danger of violently breaking apart, driving millions of refugees across its borders — who will bring with them their ethnic grievances, and in some cases their weapons — and potentially unleashing a chain reaction of regional conflicts that could draw in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and perhaps others as well.

•

Whatever else happens, Iran has already become more formidable and dangerous. Where it once had a hostile Saddam Hussein on its western border, it now has a friendly Shiite fundamentalist government. Its other longtime enemy, the United States, has had its diplomatic and military clout severely diminished by this war.

The expanding power of a revolutionary, Shiite Iran is profoundly unsettling to the conservative Sunni-led governments in most of the Arab Middle East, which have been America's traditional allies in the region. If the United States is to recoup any of its standing and influence there, it will have to find a way to contain the chaos in Iraq. And it will have to do a lot more to address other concerns of these governments and their people, starting with a genuine and sustained effort to mediate a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

If Mr. Bush does persist in sending more American troops to Baghdad, despite Congress's amply justified opposition, he will have to establish clear lines of command that assure that those troops can enter the strongholds of the Shiite militias responsible for much of the violence without militia leaders' being tipped off by allies in the Iraqi government.

- 1
- 2

[Next Page »](#)

[Next Article in Opinion \(1 of 9\) »](#)

Tips

To find reference information about the words used in this article, hold down the ALT key and click on any word, phrase or name. A new window will open with a dictionary definition or encyclopedia entry.

Related Articles

- [In Baghdad, Bush Policy Is Met With Resentment](#) (January 12, 2007)
- [A 2-Month Debate on Iraq, Capped by 'the Big Push'](#) (January 12, 2007)
- [Bush's Plan for Iraq Runs Into Opposition in Congress](#) (January 12, 2007)
- [Bush's Plan for Iraq Runs Into Opposition](#) (January 12, 2007)

Related Searches

- [Iraq](#)
- [Bush, George W](#)
- [United States Armament and Defense](#)
- [United States International Relations](#)

[Next Article in Opinion \(1 of 9\) »](#)

Inside NYTimes.com



Picking Up the Pieces

- [E-Mail](#)
- [Print](#)
- [Single Page](#)
- [Save](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY



Published: January 14, 2007

(Page 2 of 2)

And so long as any American troops remain in Iraq, Mr. Bush must put serious pressure on Mr. Maliki to support the troops' efforts with a genuine program of national reconciliation. That must include, at a minimum, ridding the police and other security services of killers, torturers and criminals and disarming all sectarian militias.

The government must also assure that Iraqi oil revenues are fairly shared out among the entire Iraqi population. And it must move quickly to offer an amnesty to Sunni insurgents willing to put down their weapons, and narrow the legal restrictions on former Baath Party members so that Sunni professionals can once again fully participate in Iraqi national life.

These benchmarks should be accompanied by fixed timelines. And they must be accompanied with a clear message that the United States is prepared to withdraw its troops if the Iraqis continue to refuse to take responsibility for their own future. Mr. Bush and other American officials need to make clear that as much as the United States will suffer from a complete collapse in Iraq, Iraq's leaders will suffer far worse from the loss of their American protectors.

Mr. Bush should reinforce that message by convening a conference of all of Iraq's neighbors to discuss how they can help stabilize Iraq — and what they can do to contain the wider chaos should it come. With nearly two million Iraqis already seeking refuge, mainly in Syria and Jordan, it is far past time for American officials to begin their own planning and relief efforts.

If Mr. Bush refuses to deliver this ultimatum to Mr. Maliki, Congress will have to do so in his stead. That's not the usual division of labor between the executive and legislative branches, but it is one that Mr. Bush has made necessary by his refusal to face realities. The potential consequences of his failed leadership are so serious that neither the new Democratic majorities in Congress, nor the public at large, can afford the luxury of merely criticizing from the sidelines.

•

So far, Congress is off to an encouraging start, holding substantive oversight hearings and asking probing questions of administration officials for the first time in too many years. Similarly encouraging has been the bipartisan character of this reinvigorated oversight. The Congress should continue asking hard questions. And it must insist on real answers before acting on any new requests for money to support Mr. Bush's plans to send more troops to Baghdad. Congress has the authority to attach conditions to that money, imposing benchmarks and timetables on Mr. Bush, who then would be forced to impose them on the Iraqi government.

One immediate step could be a set of bipartisan resolutions spelling out the broad policy directions Congress expects the president to pursue on Iraq. That would send a useful message to the American people that lawmakers are listening to their concerns, if Mr. Bush is not, and also to Iraq's leaders.

It's now up to Congress to force the president to live up to his constitutional responsibilities and rescue this country from the consequences of one of its worst strategic blunders in modern times.

History will surely blame Mr. Bush for leading America into Iraq, but it will blame Congress if it does not act to push him onto a more realistic path.

[« Previous Page](#)

- [1](#)
- [2](#)

[Next Article in Opinion \(1 of 9\) »](#)

Tips

To find reference information about the words used in this article, hold down the ALT key and click on any word, phrase or name. A new window will open with a dictionary definition or encyclopedia entry.

Related Articles

- [In Baghdad, Bush Policy Is Met With Resentment \(January 12, 2007\)](#)
- [A 2-Month Debate on Iraq, Capped by 'the Big Push' \(January 12, 2007\)](#)
- [Bush's Plan for Iraq Runs Into Opposition in Congress \(January 12, 2007\)](#)
- [Bush's Plan for Iraq Runs Into Opposition \(January 12, 2007\)](#)

Related Searches

- [Iraq](#)
- [Bush, George W](#)
- [United States Armament and Defense](#)
- [United States International Relations](#)

[Next Article in Opinion \(1 of 9\) »](#)

Inside NYTimes.com

[Style »](#)

[The City »](#)

[Music »](#)

[TimesSelect](#)

[Magazine »](#)

[TimesSelect](#)