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How to Get Out of Iraq

A Forum

by Various Contributors

As the situation in Iraq goes from bad to worse, many Americans who opposed the war, including Nation editors and writers, understand that the country must find a way to extricate itself from the disaster they predicted. There is, however, no agreement or even clarity about such an exit strategy. Nor is any leadership on this crucial issue coming from the Bush Administration or as yet, alas, from the presumptive Democratic candidate, Senator John Kerry. With a sense of obligation and urgency, The Nation, has asked a range of writers, both regular and new contributors to the magazine, for their ideas on America's way out of Iraq. Some responded with short essays, while others were interviewed by contributing writer Scott Sherman, who transcribed and edited their remarks. We hope that what follows is the beginning toward a necessary end. And we invite readers to respond; we will publish an exchange in an upcoming issue. --The Editors

Jonathan Schell

In the debate over the Iraq war, a new-minted fragment of conventional wisdom has fixed itself in the minds of mainstream politicians and commentators. Whether or not it was right to go to war, we are told on all sides, the United States must now succeed in achieving its aims. In the words of John Kerry, "Americans differ about whether and how we should have gone to war, but it would be unthinkable now for us to retreat in disarray and leave behind a society deep in strife and dominated by radicals." Or as Senator Richard Lugar has said, "We are in Iraq and so we're going to have to bring

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stability." Or, as Senator Joseph Biden, among so many others, has said, as if to put an end to all discussion, "Failure is not an option."

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The argument is an irritating one for those of us who opposed the war, suggesting, as it does, that we must now sign up for the project ("stay the course") because the very mistake we warned against was made. But the problems are more serious than annoyance. Of course, no one wants to see anarchy or repression in Iraq or any other country. But what can it mean to say that failure is not an option? Has the decision to go to war exhausted our powers of thought and will? Must we surrender now to fate? "Failure" is in truth never an "option." The exercise of an option is a voluntary act; but failure is forced upon you by events. It is what happens when your options run out. To rule out failure is not a policy but a wish--and a wish, indeed, for omnipotence. Yet no one, not even the world's sole superpower, is omnipotent. To imagine otherwise is to set yourself up for a fall even bigger than the failure you imagine you are ruling out.

And so decisions must still be made. It's true that we opponents of the war cannot simply say (as we might like to do), "Please roll history back to March of 2003, and make your disastrous war unhappen." It's also true that when the United States overthrew the Iraqi government it took on new responsibilities. The strongest argument for staying in Iraq is that the United States, having taken over the country, owes its people a better future. But acknowledgment of such a responsibility is only the beginning, not the end, of an argument.

To meet a responsibility to someone, you must have something on offer that they want. Certainly, the people of Iraq want electricity, running water and other material assistance. The United States should supply it. Perhaps--it's hard to find out--they also want democracy. But democracy cannot be shipped to Iraq on a tanker or a C-5A. It is a homegrown construct, which must flow from the will of the people involved. The expression of that will is, in fact, what democracy is.

But today the United States seeks to impose a government on Iraq in the teeth of an increasingly powerful popular opposition. The result of this policy can be seen in the shameful attacks from the air on the cordoned-off

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city of Falluja, causing hundreds of casualties. The more the United States tries to force what it insists on calling democracy on Iraq, the more the people of Iraq will hate the United States, and even, perhaps, the name of democracy. There is no definition of an obligation that includes attacking the supposed beneficiaries' cities with F-16s and AC-130 gunships.

President Bush commented recently of the Iraqis, "It's going to take a while for them to understand what freedom is all about." Hachim Hassani, a representative of the Iraqi Islamic Party, a leading Sunni Muslim group represented on the so-called Governing Council, might have been answering him when he commented to the *Los Angeles Times*, "The Iraqi people now equate democracy with bloodshed."

Under these circumstances, staying the course cannot benefit Iraq. On the contrary, each additional day that American troops continue to fight in Iraq can only compound the eventual price of the original mistake--costing more lives, American and Iraqi, disorganizing and pulverizing the society, and reducing, not fostering, any chances for a better future for the country.

There are still many things that the United States can do for the people of Iraq. Continued economic assistance is one. Another is to help international organizations assist (but only to whatever degree is wanted by the local people) in the transition to a new political order. But all combat operations should cease immediately and then, on a fixed and announced timetable, the American forces should withdraw from the country. In short, the United States, working with others, should give Iraqis their best chance to succeed in their own efforts to create their own future.

According to the most recent Times/CBS poll, the public, by a margin of 48 percent to 46 percent, has decided, with no encouragement from either of the two major-party presidential candidates or from most media commentators, that the war was a mistake. Forty-six percent have decided that the American troops should be withdrawn. They are right. The United States should never have invaded Iraq. Now it should leave.

The Harold Willens Peace Fellow at The Nation Institute, he is the author, most recently, of The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People (Metropolitan).

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