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The Speech the President Should Give

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Boston

TONIGHT President Bush will discuss the situation in Iraq. It's long past time to get it right in Iraq. The Bush administration is courting disaster with its current course - a course with no realistic strategy for reducing the risks to our soldiers and increasing the odds for success.

The reality is that the Bush administration's choices have made Iraq into what it wasn't before the war - a breeding ground for jihadists. Today there are 16,000 to 20,000 jihadists and the number is growing. The administration has put itself - and, tragically, our troops, who pay the price every day - in a box of its own making. Getting out of this box won't be easy, but we owe it to our soldiers to make our best effort.

Our mission in Iraq is harder because the administration ignored the advice of others, went in largely alone, underestimated the likelihood and power of the insurgency, sent in too few troops to secure the country, destroyed the Iraqi army through de-Baathification, failed to secure ammunition dumps, refused to recognize the urgency of training Iraqi security forces and did no postwar planning. A little humility would go a long way - coupled with a strategy to succeed.

So what should the president say tonight? The first thing he should do is tell the truth to the American people. Happy talk about the insurgency being in "the last throes" leads to frustrated expectations at home. It also encourages reluctant, sidelined nations that know better to turn their backs on their common interest in keeping Iraq from becoming a failed state.

The president must also announce immediately that the United States will not have a permanent military presence in Iraq. Erasing suspicions that the occupation is indefinite is critical to eroding support for the insurgency.

He should also say that the United States will insist that the Iraqis establish a truly inclusive political process and meet the deadlines for finishing the Constitution and holding elections in December. We're doing our part: our huge military presence stands between the Iraqi people and chaos, and our special forces protect Iraqi leaders. The Iraqis must now do theirs.

He also needs to put the training of Iraqi troops on a true six-month wartime footing and ensure that the Iraqi government has the budget needed to deploy them. The administration and the Iraqi government must stop using the requirement that troops be trained in-country as an excuse for refusing offers made by Egypt, Jordan, France and Germany to do more.

The administration must immediately draw up a detailed plan with clear milestones and deadlines for the transfer of military and police responsibilities to Iraqis after the December elections. The plan should be shared with Congress. The guideposts should take into account political and security needs and objectives and be linked to specific tasks and accomplishments. If Iraqis adopt a constitution and hold elections as planned, support for the insurgency should fall and Iraqi security forces should be able to take on more responsibility. It will also set the stage for American forces to begin to come home.

Iraq, of course, badly needs a unified national army, but until it has one - something that our generals now say could take two more years - it should make use of its tribal, religious and ethnic militias like the Kurdish pesh merga and the Shiite Badr Brigade to provide protection and help with reconstruction. Instead of single-mindedly focusing on training a national army, the administration should prod the Iraqi government to fill the current security gap by integrating these militias into a National Guard-type force that can provide security in their own areas.

The administration must work with the Iraqi government to establish a multinational force to help protect its borders. Such a force, if sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council, could attract participation by Iraq's neighbors and countries like India.

The deployment of capable security forces is critical, but it alone will not end the insurgency, as the administration would have us believe. Hamstrung by its earlier lack of planning and overly optimistic predictions for rebuilding Iraq, the administration has failed to devote equal attention to working with the Iraqi government on the economic and political fronts. Consequently, reconstruction is lagging even in the relatively secure Shiite south and Kurdish north. If Iraqis, particularly Sunnis who fear being disenfranchised, see electricity flowing, jobs being created, roads and sewers being rebuilt and a democratic government being formed, the allure of the insurgency will decrease.

Iraq's Sunni neighbors, who complain they are left out, could do more to help. Even short-term improvements, like providing electricity and supplying diesel fuel - an offer that the Saudis have made but have yet to fulfill - will go a long way. But we need to give these nations a strategic plan for regional security, acknowledging their fears of an Iran-dominated crescent and their concerns about our fitful mediation between Israel and the Palestinians in return for their help in rebuilding Iraq, protecting its borders, and bringing its Sunnis into the political process.

The next months are critical to Iraq's future and our security. If Mr. Bush fails to take these steps, we will stumble along, our troops at greater risk, casualties rising, costs rising, the patience of the American people wearing thin, and the specter of quagmire staring us in the face. Our troops deserve better: they deserve leadership equal to their sacrifice.

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