The Smart Way Out of a Foolish War

By Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski

Theme: US NATO War Agenda

Both Democratic presidential candidates agree that the United States should end its combat mission in Iraq within 12 to 16 months of their possible inauguration. The Republican candidate has spoken of continuing the war, even for a hundred years, until "victory." The core issue of this campaign is thus a basic disagreement over the merits of the war and the benefits and costs of continuing it.

The case for U.S. disengagement from combat is compelling in its own right. But it must be matched by a comprehensive political and diplomatic effort to mitigate the destabilizing regional consequences of a war that the outgoing Bush administration started deliberately, justified demagogically and waged badly. (I write, of course, as a Democrat; while I prefer Sen. Barack Obama, I speak here for myself.)

The contrast between the Democratic argument for ending the war and the Republican argument for continuing is sharp and dramatic. The case for terminating the war is based on its prohibitive and tangible costs, while the case for "staying the course" draws heavily on shadowy fears of the unknown and relies on worst-case scenarios. President Bush's and Sen. John McCain's forecasts of regional catastrophe are quite reminiscent of the predictions of "falling dominoes" that were used to justify continued U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Neither has provided any real evidence that ending the war would mean disaster, but their fear-mongering makes prolonging it easier.

Nonetheless, if the American people had been asked more than five years ago whether Bush's obsession with the removal of Saddam Hussein was worth 4,000 American lives, almost 30,000 wounded Americans and several trillion dollars — not to mention the less precisely measurable damage to the United States' world-wide credibility, legitimacy and moral standing — the answer almost certainly would have been an unequivocal "no."

Nor do the costs of this fiasco end there. The war has inflamed anti-American passions in the Middle East and South Asia while fragmenting Iraqi society and increasing the influence of Iran. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's recent visit to Baghdad offers ample testimony that even the U.S.-installed government in Iraq is becoming susceptible to Iranian blandishments.

In brief, the war has become a national tragedy, an economic catastrophe, a regional disaster and a global boomerang for the United States. Ending it is thus in the highest national interest.

Terminating U.S. combat operations will take more than a military decision. It will require arrangements with Iraqi leaders for a continued, residual U.S. capacity to provide emergency assistance in the event of an external threat (e.g., from Iran); it will also mean

finding ways to provide continued U.S. support for the Iraqi armed forces as they cope with the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The decision to militarily disengage will also have to be accompanied by political and regional initiatives designed to guard against potential risks. We should fully discuss our decisions with Iraqi leaders, including those not residing in Baghdad's Green Zone, and we should hold talks on regional stability with all of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran.

Contrary to Republican claims that our departure will mean calamity, a sensibly conducted disengagement will actually make Iraq more stable over the long term. The impasse in Shiite-Sunni relations is in large part the sour byproduct of the destructive U.S. occupation, which breeds Iraqi dependency even as it shatters Iraqi society. In this context, so highly reminiscent of the British colonial era, the longer we stay in Iraq, the less incentive various contending groups will have to compromise and the more reason simply to sit back. A serious dialogue with the Iraqi leaders about the forthcoming U.S. disengagement would shake them out of their stupor.

Ending the U.S. war effort entails some risks, of course, but they are inescapable at this late date. Parts of Iraq are already self-governing, including Kurdistan, part of the Shiite south and some tribal areas in the Sunni center. U.S. military disengagement will accelerate Iraqi competition to more effectively control their territory, which may produce a phase of intensified inter-Iraqi conflicts. But that hazard is the unavoidable consequence of the prolonged U.S. occupation. The longer it lasts, the more difficult it will be for a viable Iraqi state ever to reemerge.

It is also important to recognize that most of the anti-U.S. insurgency in Iraq has *not* been inspired by al-Qaeda. Locally based jihadist groups have gained strength only insofar as they have been able to identify themselves with the fight against a hated foreign occupier. As the occupation winds down and Iraqis take responsibility for internal security, al-Qaeda in Iraq will be left more isolated and less able to sustain itself. The end of the occupation will thus be a boon for the war on al-Qaeda, bringing to an end a misguided adventure that not only precipitated the appearance of al-Qaeda in Iraq but also diverted the United States from Afghanistan, where the original al-Qaeda threat grew and still persists.

Bringing the U.S. military effort to a close would also smooth the way for a broad U.S. initiative addressed to all of Iraq's neighbors. Some will remain reluctant to engage in any discussion as long as Washington appears determined to maintain its occupation of Iraq indefinitely. Therefore, at some stage next year, after the decision to disengage has been announced, a regional conference should be convened to promote regional stability, border control and other security arrangements, as well as regional economic development — all of which would help mitigate the unavoidable risks connected with U.S. disengagement.

Since Iraq's neighbors are vulnerable to intensified ethnic and religious conflicts spilling over from Iraq, all of them — albeit for different reasons — are likely to be interested. More distant Arab states such as Egypt, Morocco or Algeria might also take part, and some of them might be willing to provide peacekeeping forces to Iraq once it is free of foreign occupation. In addition, we should consider a regional rehabilitation program designed to help Iraq recover and to relieve the burdens that Jordan and Syria, in particular, have shouldered by hosting more than 2 million Iraqi refugees.

The overall goal of a comprehensive U.S. strategy to undo the errors of recent years should be cooling down the Middle East, instead of heating it up. The "unipolar moment" that the Bush administration's zealots touted after the collapse of the Soviet Union has been squandered to generate a policy based on the unilateral use of force, military threats and occupation masquerading as democratization — all of which has pointlessly heated up tensions, fueled anti-colonial resentments and bred religious fanaticism. The long-range stability of the Middle East has been placed in increasing jeopardy.

Terminating the war in Iraq is the necessary first step to calming the Middle East, but other measures will be needed. It is in the U.S. interest to engage Iran in serious negotiations — on both regional security and the nuclear challenge it poses. But such negotiations are unlikely as long as Washington's price of participation is unreciprocated concessions from Tehran. Threats to use force on Iran are also counterproductive because they tend to fuse Iranian nationalism with religious fanaticism.

Real progress in the badly stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process would also help soothe the region's religious and nationalist passions. But for such progress to take place, the United States must vigorously help the two sides start making the mutual concessions without which a historic compromise cannot be achieved. Peace between Israel and Palestine would be a giant step toward greater regional stability, and it would finally let both Israelis and Palestinians benefit from the Middle East's growing wealth.

We started this war rashly, but we must end our involvement responsibly. And end it we must. The alternative is a fear-driven policy paralysis that perpetuates the war — to America's historic detriment.

Zbigniew Brzezinski was national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter. His most recent book is "Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower."

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