Washington now faces a no-win situation in Iraq

By Patrick Seale
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America is facing the real possibility of defeat in Iraq. The insurgency is as robust and as lethal as ever. U.S. troops are overstretched and thin on the ground, while Iraqi troops are far from ready to replace them. Sectarian violence is on the rise, suggesting that civil war is just round the corner. Every day brings its terrible tale of carnage. There seems to be no safety anywhere – and certainly not in Baghdad. Iraq under American occupation is slipping into uncontrollable chaos.

This is the backdrop to the visit to Washington that took place last Friday of Iraq's new Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari. For both Jaafari and U.S. President George W. Bush, this is an exceedingly difficult moment.

What should America do? Should it leave Iraq, or should it stay? No choice has been more difficult for an American president since the Vietnam War. For the first time, a leading American politician and potential presidential candidate, Republican Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, was brave enough to say: "The White House is completely disconnected from reality The reality is, we're losing in Iraq."

Even more dangerous for the "war party" – the neoconservative cabal that pressed for war against Iraq – is that it is losing the war in the United States. American opinion is tiring of the war. According to the latest Gallop poll, 57 percent of Americans think the war is "not worth it." Members of Congress report that their constituents are getting restless. As casualties mount, the word from the grass roots is "enough is enough!" Army recruitment rates have plunged, as have Bush's approval ratings, now down to 42 percent from 51 percent after the November elections. In the House of Representatives, a bipartisan group of Democrats and Republicans are drafting a resolution calling on Bush to present a strategy for getting the U.S. out of Iraq.

In Brussels last week, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice tried to drum up international support in men and funds for the Iraq war, but America's allies are extremely reluctant to get sucked into the quagmire. They want Iraqi reconstruction contracts and oil concessions, but they do not want to fight the insurgency. On the contrary, they are heading for the exit. The international coalition has disintegrated. Britain is the only country which still has a substantial fighting force in Iraq, alongside 139,000 American troops.

At a speech at Harvard University on June 7, a former CIA director, John M. Deutch, called for American troops to pull out of Iraq "as soon as possible." Echoing proposals made last January by Senator Edward Kennedy, Deutch said the U.S. should begin the military withdrawal and let Iraqis make their own political decisions.

The opposite view was put last week by The Economist – which has a large American readership. "Recent talk of shipping lots of troops home early next year looks wildly unrealistic," it declared. It quoted "top American officers in Iraq" as saying that the U.S. should not contemplate making significant troops withdrawals for at least two years, perhaps longer.

The Economist was a supporter of the war and still has not had second thoughts. It still thinks America should stay the course and advocates sending in more U.S. troops: "Indeed, if America is serious about vanquishing this insurgency," the magazine argued, "it needs more rather than fewer American boots on the ground to prevail in Iraq, America needs urgently to raise new forces that can be committed to a low-intensity counter-insurgency that might drag on for years."

Those who argue that America should fight on in Iraq point to the danger of "handing victory to the terrorists." An American withdrawal would, they allege, encourage extremists to redouble their campaign, not only against America and its interests in various parts of the world, but also against its regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan.

This is precisely the argument used by those who oppose Israel's disengagement from Gaza. An Israeli withdrawal, they claim, would hand victory to Hamas and spread the message that terrorism pays. The thought of Hamas members dancing on the roofs of Jewish settlements seems to be the ultimate Israeli nightmare.

The opposite – and more convincing argument – is that Israel's brutal occupation of Gaza and the West Bank is the main cause of anti- Israeli violence, and that Israel's security would best be served by evacuating, rather than settling, occupied Palestinian territory.

In the same way, the longer the U.S. stays in Iraq, the more attacks it will face. As I wrote long before the war, occupation breeds insurrection. A further argument for getting out is that the continued U.S. occupation of Iraq is turning that country into a training ground for nationalist and Islamic militants from many different countries who, sooner or later, will spread violence elsewhere. As a breeding ground for jihad, Iraq seems set to be playing the same role as Afghanistan in the 1980s.

There has, as yet, been no candid debate in the mainstream U.S. media, still less in Congress, on the controversial question of America's war aims. Why did the U.S. make war on Iraq? The official reasons – Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction and its links with Al-Qaeda – have now been shown to be lies. What then were the real reasons?

It would seem that men like Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Bush himself – advocates of using military power to shape the world to America's advantage – were persuaded that Iraq presented a tremendous prize. Its oil reserves were equal to those of Saudi Arabia; its reconstruction was estimated to be worth tens of billions of dollars to American firms; while its strategic position made it an ideal place from which to project U.S. military power to the oil-rich Gulf and to a vast region beyond. Seizing Iraq and turning it into a client state was a tempting goal.

Prominent neocons in the Pentagon, such as the former deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, his associate Douglas Feith, and their many friends and colleagues in and out of the administration, pressed for the destruction of Iraq and its army in order to make Israel more secure. They had long advocated regime change in Iraq, but the September 11, 2001

attacks gave them the pretext to push the case for war with greater urgency. They peddled the fantasy that, freed from Saddam Hussein's tyranny, a "democratic" Iraq would be a model for the entire Middle East, which could then be reshaped and restructured to make it pro-American and pro-Israeli.

The Iraq war was in fact the product of parallel American and Israeli ambitions. Israel's objectives have been achieved: Iraq has been weakened for at least a generation. But America's war aims remain out of reach. If the U.S. leaves Iraq, its efforts will have been in vain. But if it stays, the cost in men and treasure will inevitably mount, with no guarantee of political, economic or strategic benefits at the end of the day.

This is the disagreeable dilemma with which Bush, the U.S. Congress and the whole American defense and foreign policy establishment must wrestle with in the months ahead.

Patrick Seale, a veteran Middle East analyst, wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR.

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