

Bridge Over The River Euphrates

Colin H. Kahl

Dexter Filkins, *Forever War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

Peter W. Galbraith, *Unintended Consequences* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008).

IN LATE 2006, as the National Security Council (NSC) debated the need for the troop escalation and change in Iraq policy commonly known as the “surge,” they didn’t call it that. They called it the “bridge.” It had become agonizingly clear that President Bush’s plan to have U.S. forces “stand down” as the Iraqis “stood up” had failed. Iraq had fallen into sectarian civil war, and the hastily rebuilt Iraqi security forces (ISF) were not only incapable of providing order, but were in many instances agents of chaos themselves. The goal of the surge was to have U.S. forces take the lead in providing population security in Baghdad, buying time for political accord and strengthening the ISF. The surge, in short, was never meant to be a permanent state, but rather a bridge *back* to the original goal: transitioning security responsibilities to the Iraqis.

Travelling across Iraq as the surge ended this summer, it was clear that security conditions had dramatically improved since the dark days of 2006 and early 2007. Visiting joint U.S.-Iraqi security stations in Baghdad and Mosul, visiting Iraqi forces in the former “triangle of death,” touring

Basra with the Iraqi Army, and speaking with dozens of American and Iraqi commanders and officials, it was also clear that the ISF have made great strides. Despite these enormous gains, however, no one in Iraq was doing a victory lap. The war is not over, and the deep political conflicts at the root of Iraq’s ethno-sectarian tensions have not been resolved. The fragile calm that has descended on the country could be undone if the United States fails to effectively push Iraqi leaders to reach a broader political accord. As the Bush administration winds to a close, it will be up to the next president to cross the bridge provided by the surge, and do so in a way that leads to lasting stability.

NUMEROUS BOOKS have catalogued the series of blunders contributing to Iraq’s descent into disaster, but none more effectively than Dexter Filkins’s *Forever War*. Filkins’s brutally honest account is based on his three-and-a-half years of reporting from Iraq for the *New York Times*. Filkins lived in the “red zone,” regularly embedded with U.S. troops, and was one of the few American journalists present during the ferocious November 2004 Fallujah offensive. For the most part, Filkins does not give a thirty-thousand-foot view of Iraq. Instead, he provides a ground-level, mud- and blood-soaked eyewitness account in the very best tradition of war reporting. Filkins’s narrative unfolds in a nonlinear, back-and-forth style that gives the reader a feel for combat, a feel for the Iraqi street, and a feel for a country slipping away.

Filkins crossed into Iraq at the outset of the invasion and saw firsthand how too few troops and too little planning led to chaos. Watching Iraqis loot computers and

just about everything else from the Iraqi Olympic Committee offices, Filkins asked a young U.S. lieutenant why his men were letting the Iraqis “destroy the city.” Shaking his head, the lieutenant responded: “I don’t have orders.” Looting stripped Iraq’s economic and governmental infrastructure bare, while the failure of U.S. forces to prevent it sent a powerful message that no one was in charge. Fast on the heels of this devastating mistake came others, most notably the May 2003 orders by L. Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (commonly derided as “Can’t Provide Anything”), to carry out deep de-Baathification and disband the Iraqi Army. These fateful decisions left hundreds of thousands of military-aged men jobless and contributed to the rise of a virulent Sunni insurgency.

The most powerful conventional military in the world was caught unprepared for unconventional war. The Americans lacked the requisite language skills and cultural awareness, leaving them deaf and blind in the country they were trying to govern. Filkins writes,

There were always two conversations in Iraq, the one the Iraqis were having with the Americans and the one they were having among themselves. . . . The conversation they were having with each other was the one that really mattered, of course. That conversation . . . sometimes unfolded right next to the Americans, even right in front of them. And they almost never saw it.

The key shortcoming of the U.S. approach to “postwar” Iraq was the overemphasis on force protection and killing and capturing “the enemy” rather than securing the population. Under Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, the commander of all U.S. forces during the first year of the war, American troops had no coherent guidance to stabilize the country or defeat the emerging insurgency. Instead, subordinate commanders were left to their

own devices. Many attempted to win over local communities through reconstruction projects and political outreach, but their efforts were typically ad hoc, and they lacked capable civilian partners.

As the insurgency gained strength and American deaths mounted in the summer and fall of 2003, some U.S. units turned to heavy-handed tactics. This laid the groundwork for a long-lasting, deep resentment of American troops. Thousands of Sunni were rounded up in indiscriminate sweeps and shipped off to overcrowded detention centers. Others were caught in the crossfire during raids and large-scale offensives. Filkins describes going on one such raid in a Sunni village in late 2003. U.S. forces rolled into town, kicking down doors and rousting terrified families out of their beds looking for “bad guys.” “I feel bad for these people,” one sergeant said. “It’s so hard to separate the good from the bad.” As Filkins notes,

If you multiplied the raid on Abu Shakur a thousand times, it was not difficult to conclude that the war was being lost: however many Iraqis opposed them before the Americans came into the village, dozens and dozens more did by the time they left. The Americans were making enemies faster than they could kill them.

No surprise, by the spring of 2004, much of Iraq was in open revolt. The death and mutilation of four American contractors in late March triggered a horrific clash between Marines and Sunni militants in Fallujah. At the end of April, the city was handed over to an Iraqi brigade, but local Iraqi security forces soon dissolved, transforming Fallujah into a major hub for the Sunni insurgency. Near simultaneously, Muqtada al-Sadr’s Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) militia launched a Shia uprising across the south-central portions of the country. By August, U.S. forces had al-Sadr and many of his militiamen cornered in the Imam Ali shrine in Najaf, but



a cease-fire ended the fighting. Yet despite promises to demobilize, Filkins notes, “The Mahdi Army was . . . allowed to slip away, like Muqtada himself. That was the deal. They would live to fight again.”

In November, thousands of U.S. and Iraqi troops were sent back into Fallujah to clear the city of insurgents. Civilians fled in anticipation of the attack and the Americans unleashed an extraordinary amount of firepower against the remaining insurgents. After the fighting ended, Filkins, who entered Fallujah alongside a company of Marines, looked out on “A ruined world. Nothing like the way we had found it coming in. . . . The marines had blasted everything: every building, every car, even if there was no one in it, every f*cking person, even the ones hidden in the shadows.”

The net effect of early U.S. counterinsurgency measures was to worsen the insurrection by alienating a growing segment of the Iraqi population while leaving the remainder unprotected. And the escalating insurgency, in turn, set the stage for sectarian war. The most radical elements within the Sunni insurgency began to directly target Shia civilians,

and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) carried out a seemingly endless series of mass-casualty bombings. Many Shia turned to JAM and other militias for protection.

At the same time, the overall strategy adopted by the Bush administration and U.S. generals unwittingly fueled communal violence. The plan designed by General George Casey, Sanchez’s replacement, gave top priority to the “transition” of security responsibility to the Iraqis. In 2004–2005, the goal was less to defeat the insurgency in the short term, which was seen as unlikely, than to hold the insurgency down to manageable levels until the ISF were capable of taking over. But, according to Filkins, the rapid buildup of Iraqi forces to accomplish this objective had a significant downside: it allowed Shia militias to infiltrate the ISF.

Another element of the Bush administration’s approach—the emphasis on elections—had a similar unintended effect. The administration, the military leadership and Embassy Baghdad hoped that the 2005 provincial and national elections would pull Sunni into the political process and drain support for the insurgency. Instead, the Sunni boycotted them, and, as

Filkins notes, the Shia Islamist parties that took power “stuffed the ministries with their own gunmen, gave them uniforms and identification cards, and turned them loose.” Paramilitary commandos in the National Police began to enforce a violent sectarian agenda. “That’s how the civil war worked: the death squads became official,” writes Filkins. “The Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army . . . just joined the police forces of the Shiite-led government.”

Together, the emphasis on transition and elections effectively armed one side in a violent communal struggle. A low-grade, tit-for-tat civil war between Sunni insurgents and Shia militias was thus well under way when the February 2006 bombing of the Golden Shrine in Samarra by AQI—one of the holiest sites in Shia Islam—tipped the country into all-out sectarian warfare. After that, Shia militias went on a rampage and set about systematically cleansing Baghdad of Sunni. The newly formed “unity” government led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was beholden to both the Sadrists and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and therefore did little to reign in the militias. The ISF proved incapable and unwilling to quell the violence, and, in some areas, were perpetrators. In this landscape, Filkins writes,

there were Shiite police killing Sunni insurgents, Sunni police killing Shiite politicians. The Americans lost track. The Iraqis lost track. . . . So many groups and so many guns and so many uniforms. So many patches. It was like the final scene in “The Sneetches,” the Dr. Seuss story that ends in a frenzy of Sneetches having stars planted and removed from their chests. At the end of the story, none of the Sneetches could remember who had had a star in the first place.

Neither could the Americans. All they had were the bodies.

LIKE MOST book-length accounts of the Iraq War, Filkins’s text ends in 2006. Into this narrative void

steps Linda Robinson, a reporter for *U.S. News and World Report*, who chronicles the origins and effects of the surge in *Tell Me How This Ends*. Robinson’s account draws on extensive interviews with administration officials and senior military commanders, as well as reporting from some of Baghdad’s most dangerous neighborhoods. If the book has a flaw it is perhaps that it relies *too much* on interviews with General Petraeus and his inner circle, at times giving it the feel of an official history. As such, it will not be the final word on this important period of the war, but is nevertheless an excellent early entry.

THE WAR is not over, and the deep political conflicts at the root of Iraq’s ethno-sectarian tensions have not been resolved.

As Robinson documents, the surge emerged out of a critique of ongoing military operations in Iraq. In many respects, the story begins in November 2005, when the White House released the “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq” (NSVI). Written two-and-a-half years into the conflict, it was the first public statement outlining the administration’s road map to success. The “security track” in the NSVI recognized the critical importance of population security and called for U.S. forces to employ a “clear, hold, and build” model. But there remained a substantial mismatch between the administration’s stated strategy and the war on the ground. Applying clear-hold-build in Baghdad (let alone the rest of Iraq) would require substantial numbers of American troops—troops that President Bush, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the Joint Chiefs of Staff remained reluctant to send. General Casey, General John Abizaid (Casey’s immediate superior) and Secretary Rumsfeld all believed that a large-scale U.S. military

commitment fostered a dangerous dependency among Iraqi security forces and was the primary source of the insurgency. Instead they consolidated U.S. forces on large outlying bases, and focused on rapidly handing over security responsibilities to the Iraqis as U.S. forces made plans to withdraw.

With a handful of important exceptions in the 2005–2006 period, the majority of U.S. military units did not employ the entire clear-hold-build package. Instead, they focused on “clearing” and occasionally short-term “building,” but largely left it to Iraqi forces to “hold” areas and depended on civilian entities and the Iraqi government to provide long-term economic assistance.

As the violence in Baghdad escalated in 2006, Robinson notes, a discussion about U.S. strategy emerged within the NSC. The conclusion was that the current strategy had failed because the ISF and Iraqi government were not capable of executing the “hold” and “build” portions of the clear-hold-build model. Despite ad hoc strategic reviews at the Pentagon and NSC, the administration delayed a full-scale rethink until after the November congressional elections, so as not to provide Democratic critics of the war with extra ammunition. By December though, Bush sided with those calling for a troop surge and a fundamental change in strategy.

In January 2007, Bush announced he was sending five additional combat brigades to Baghdad and two Marine battalions to Anbar Province. These forces were supposed to partner with the Iraqi Army and police to provide population security, tamp down sectarian and insurgent violence, and thereby provide “breathing space” for political compromises among Iraq’s warring factions. Bush also announced that General David Petraeus would replace Casey and implement the new strategy.

Most of Robinson’s book recounts

what happened next. In 2006, Petraeus had championed an effort to fundamentally rewrite U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine. And, upon his arrival in Baghdad in February 2007, Petraeus and a brain trust of advisors produced a major revision of the “Joint Campaign Plan” guiding U.S. actions in Iraq. The new plan, completed in late May, framed the war as a communal struggle for power and security rather than simply an insurgency. It envisioned the surged troop levels—and a new push on the political and economic fronts—as prerequisites for population security, political accommodation and a bridging strategy after which the United States would once again move toward a transition to an Iraqi lead in security operations. It also recognized that there were too few U.S. troops to police the whole country, and so called for engaging “reconcilable” combatants to forge accommodation from the bottom up.

THE SURGE coincided with a huge improvement in the security situation, as attacks against Iraqi civilians and coalition forces declined dramatically, but whether or not it was the cause is up for debate. The significant increase in U.S. forces in Baghdad and surrounding areas, coupled with much-improved counterinsurgency practices and a growing ISF capability to hold cleared areas, was certainly one critical factor. Particularly important, according to Robinson, was the decision by U.S. commanders to establish dozens of combat outposts and Joint Security Stations to partner with the ISF deep within communities ravaged by insurgent and sectarian strife. Perhaps the best chapters in Robinson’s book chronicle in great detail the heroic efforts of U.S. forces to tame violence in two of Baghdad’s toughest neighborhoods.

But the most decisive reason for improved security was the Sunni Awakening: the successful effort to recruit Sunni tribes and former insurgents to cooperate

with U.S. forces against AQI. The Awakening began in late 2006, when a group of tribal sheiks revolted against AQI atrocities, power grabs and encroachments into tribal economic activities. So, the movement predated the surge and was spurred, in part, by increasing concerns that U.S. forces might withdraw and leave Sunni vulnerable to AQI and Shia militias. The end result was a dramatic reduction in violence in Anbar, once the hotbed of the Sunni insurgency.

Nevertheless, Robinson details how the surge helped spread the Awakening outward from Anbar to Baghdad. “The insurgents,” she writes, “made the decision to stop fighting. But the U.S. troops’ measures played an important part by setting the conditions for the volunteers to come forward. They would not have done so, at least in such numbers, had the U.S. soldiers not been out meeting with sheikhs, imams, and other intermediaries.” The real cause, however, was not the additional troops per se, but rather a change in strategy. During the summer of 2007, General Petraeus and Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno encouraged commanders to apply the Anbar model elsewhere by striking financial deals and forging cease-fires with Sunni combatants. The effort quickly spread in greater Baghdad and elsewhere, contributing to the rapid growth of the so-called Sons of Iraq (SOIs). By mid-2008, approximately one hundred thousand individuals, 80 percent of them Sunni, were collecting a monthly stipend from U.S. forces to man checkpoints and patrol neighborhoods.

Also crucial to improving security was Sadr’s decision to rein in his militia. In Karbala in August 2007, a ferocious gun battle erupted between JAM and the Badr Organization—a militia associated with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, the rebranded SCIRI party). The clash killed dozens and wounded hundreds. The following day, Sadr announced a six-month freeze on all armed actions by JAM. In February 2008, the truce was extended for an-

other six months. Sadr undoubtedly sought to avoid a direct clash with U.S. forces at the peak of the surge. But his decision was also intended to improve JAM’s image in the face of growing accusations of criminal behavior and to solidify control over his fractious organization. The fragile cease-fire temporarily collapsed this spring as a consequence of al-Maliki’s decision to launch an offensive in Basra, resulting in an escalation of fighting between JAM and U.S. and Iraqi forces in both Basra and Sadr City. But, a pair of agreements—brokered, in part, by Iran—eventually helped calm the situation and reestablish the freeze on armed activities.

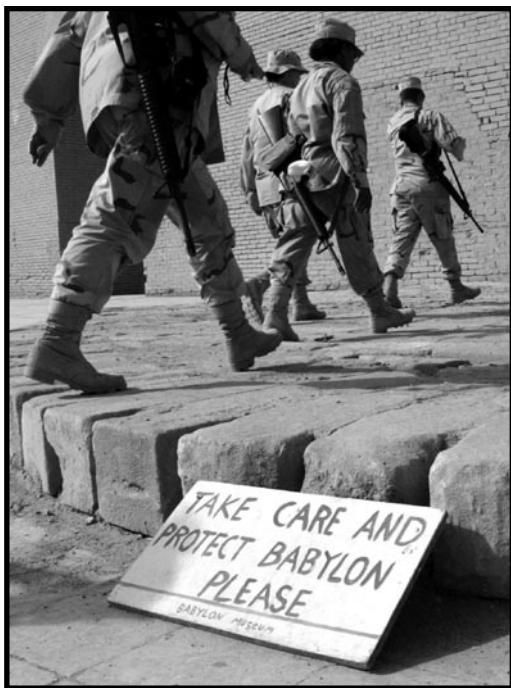
A final source of declining violence was the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis during the height of the civil war. The acceleration of sectarian cleansing in 2006 and early 2007 had the perverse effect of driving down subsequent attacks by exhausting combatants on both sides and segregating groups in Baghdad into defensible enclaves. And, as Robinson notes, these enclaves were then walled off from one another by concrete barriers erected by U.S. forces.

AS A CONSEQUENCE of these four factors—a new U.S. strategy, the Sunni Awakening, Sadr’s decision to rein in the Mahdi Army and prior sectarian cleansing—a fragile calm has now descended on Iraq. But it remains an open question whether Iraqi leaders will follow through and consolidate these gains. Although there has been some political progress—including the passage of de-Baathification reform, amnesty legislation and a law clarifying the powers of provincial governments—these laws remain vague and their implementation contentious. Al-Maliki’s efforts to crack down on JAM have won him kudos among *some* skeptical Sunni and Kurds, but genuine ethno-sectarian comity remains elusive.

Several steps are needed to bring sustainable stability to Iraq, including com-

prehensive hydrocarbons legislation outlining the management of the country's oil fields (a major issue for Kurds) and a revenue-sharing law to institutionalize the division of Iraq's oil wealth (a particular concern to Sunni Arabs). Settling governance over various contested territories, especially the oil-rich northern city of Kirkuk, is also essential to head off growing ethnic conflict in northern Iraq.

Robinson, however, suggests that key issues related to the division of power in Iraq—including oil, Kirkuk, and the relative weight of the central versus provin-



cial and regional governments in the constitution—may have to wait until a new national government is in place, and she may be right. In the meantime, a series of other steps are needed to lock in and take advantage of the successful cease-fires established during the surge.

Most important, according to Robinson, “is to speedily incorporate all of the vetted Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi security forces or other jobs.” Al-Maliki initially embraced the Awakening when it emerged in Sunni-dominated Anbar, but as the movement spread to Baghdad and other

mixed areas, the prime minister became increasingly nervous. Unlike the tribes of Anbar, many of the newly formed SOIs contained members of Sunni insurgent groups—individuals that al-Maliki and his advisors viewed as irredeemable terrorists.

In the lead-up to his September 2007 testimony before Congress, Petraeus attempted to get al-Maliki to reach out to the growing number of SOI groups and begin integrating them into the ISF. After considerable cajoling, al-Maliki relented, but Petraeus could only get the prime minister to authorize integrating about 1,500 SOIs from rural Abu Ghraib, on the western outskirts of Baghdad. Even then, as Robinson describes, the al-Maliki government slow-rolled the process. They blamed Abu Ghraib's SOIs for attacks on Iraqi Army checkpoints they did not commit, and demanded that SOI recruits from Abu Ghraib be trained at a police training station in eastern Baghdad, requiring them to drive through Shia-militia-infested neighborhoods where they could easily be attacked. Little has changed. During my recent trip to Baghdad, discussions with U.S. military commanders and civilian officials, as well several SOI members, suggested that al-Maliki remains highly reluctant to integrate and employ Sunni security volunteers.

Building on gains from the surge also requires fair elections that give groups who boycotted the 2005 elections a shot at gaining local and national power. Most Sunni and many Sadrists are currently underrepresented in many provincial councils. As new leadership figures have begun to emerge at the local level, especially in Sunni areas, new provincial elections are vital to enhance government legitimacy and provide nonviolent channels for political competition. The United States must also make clear that provincial elections should be relatively free of intimidation by *all* parties. In this respect, recent Iraqi government offensives in Basra and Maysan province are troubling. The particular

focus of these operations suggests that they were—at least partly—an attempt by ISCI and Dawa to use the ISF to delegitimize and weaken Sadrist and other rival political parties. A wider effort to use the ISF or other elements of state power to rig the vote against the Sadrists, Awakening groups or independents would play to the advantage of extremist factions calling for a return to violence. Another big test will be national elections expected in late 2009, which will provide a referendum on the ethno-sectarian parties that currently dominate the parliament.

The United States must also push the Iraqi government to develop a comprehensive plan to address the plight of the nearly 5 million Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. As a consequence of growing economic hardship abroad and improved security in Baghdad, Iraqi refugees have begun trickling back into the country. Other internally displaced individuals are also beginning to return home, only to find families from a rival sect occupying their houses. The Iraqi government currently lacks a mechanism to deal with these disputes and otherwise prevent the influx from sparking a fresh round of bloodshed.

This is symptomatic of a wider problem highlighted by Robinson: the lack of essential services. As a consequence of inadequate capacity, corruption and lingering sectarian bias, the Iraqi government has made little headway in providing jobs and improving the delivery of electricity, sanitation, clean water and health care. Frustrations are growing in both Sunni and Shia areas, putting at risk hard-fought security gains.

Last but not least, a running theme through both the Filkins and Robinson volumes is the notion that lasting stability in Iraq is impossible without capable and *neutral* Iraqi security forces. In 2008, there were signs that the Iraqi Army was starting to find its feet and improving its capabilities. Still, the Iraqi Army will

likely require substantial U.S. assistance for the foreseeable future even as it takes on greater responsibility for population security. Continuing to root out sectarianism in the National Police, integrating the SOIs and creating local police forces that have the trust of the communities they protect are the biggest challenges ahead.

THE NEXT American president will take office at a critical juncture in the Iraq War. Robinson advocates maintaining a significant force presence through the end of 2009, but the forty-fourth president will likely face irresistible pressures to begin a significant draw-down. Continued Iraqi public opposition to the U.S. presence and growing confidence in the ISF have already encouraged al-Maliki and other Iraqi leaders to advocate a time horizon for a withdrawal and shift of U.S. forces to a purely support role. Unsustainable strains on U.S. ground forces and demands for additional troops for Afghanistan also create powerful pressures to draw down in Iraq. Thus, the real strategic issue is not *whether* the United States should or will withdraw, but rather *how* the United States can most effectively use its diminishing leverage to push the Iraqi government to reach much-needed political accords.

Some believe this is a hopeless game. In *Unintended Consequences*, Peter Galbraith dismisses the “Potemkin” progress produced by the surge, and argues that the war and any hope for a unified Iraq are irredeemably lost. For Galbraith, the differences between Sunni, Shia and Kurds “are fundamental and cannot be papered over” through various legislative accommodations: “If the Iraqis were willing and able to agree on a program of national reconciliation, revenue sharing, or constitutional amendments, they would have.” Galbraith has long advocated a “soft partition” of Iraq and a vision of the country broadly in line with Kurdish interests, and he continues to do so here. He calls for the

withdrawal of U.S. forces—leaving only a small presence behind in Kurdistan—and for letting the three major ethno-sectarian communities go their own way.

As it begins its withdrawal, Galbraith argues, the United States “needs a strategy to contain or, ideally, to prevent the disputed areas [especially Kirkuk] from becoming a flashpoint for new conflicts.” American forces should also continue to pay the SOIs while helping “demarcate respective Shiite and Sunni zones in the capital [Baghdad], work out rules of engagement for the respective militias, and possibly sponsor efforts to professionalize the militias.” But Galbraith offers no mechanism to effectively push Iraqi leaders to make these compromises, and, ultimately, he believes the United States lacks the necessary leverage to do so.

Despite its recent vintage, Galbraith’s short book has the feel of a long op-ed that is strangely out of date. Certainly the gains from the surge have, in some quarters, been wildly exaggerated and there remain deep divisions and great conflict potential in Iraq. But the events of the past year counsel against resigning ourselves to the inevitable breakup of Iraq, and signing on to Galbraith’s proposals would almost certainly make disintegration a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The problem is not that the United States lacks leverage over the Iraqi government; the problem is that the Bush administration has never effectively utilized that leverage. Since the formation of the al-Maliki government, Bush has resisted efforts to place conditions on U.S. support. In December 2006, the bipartisan Iraq Study Group recommended a draw-down of U.S. forces coupled with greater conditionality of remaining support. In deciding on the surge, Bush rejected both

recommendations. As Robinson notes,

The political strategy was essentially to keep trying to persuade Iraq Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to do the right thing. He had promised to provide more Iraqi troops to secure Baghdad and to allow the targeting of Shia outlaws, but there was no implicit or explicit “or else” should he fail to do so. The main hope . . . was that if Sunni attacks were blunted, Shias would rein in their own sectarian agenda. But there was no appetite for imposing conditions on the Shia-led government.

Throughout 2007, the administration also resisted efforts by Congress to put teeth into the so-called benchmarks established to measure progress toward accommodation. And, for more than two years, the perception of a blank check to the

Iraqi government has been reinforced by regular “attaboy” video conferences where President Bush assures al-Maliki that the prime minister has his full support.

As Robinson demonstrates, Bush’s unconditional embrace of al-Maliki resulted from the fundamental assumption driving the administration’s strategic assessments from the start—namely, that the primary problem with Iraq’s government is one of capacity, not political will. But *both* were and remain problems, and the lack of strings attached to U.S. support for the Iraqi government left the latter completely unaddressed. Robinson reveals numerous examples of U.S. commanders and diplomats attempting to use tactical leverage to push Iraqi officials toward political compromise, only to have their message and effectiveness undermined by the complete absence of conditionality at the strategic level.

The Bush administration has con-

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sistently missed opportunities to condition overall support to the ISF on Iraqi-government commitments to nonsectarianism and political accord, which has often exacerbated communal violence. If the next administration repeats that mistake, the prospects for renewed strife in Iraq are high. Given growing confidence among al-Maliki and other Iraqi leaders in the capabilities of the ISF, some may question whether U.S. assistance still provides useful leverage. But the truth is that recent Iraqi operations in Basra, Sadr City, Mosul and elsewhere would not have been successful without “critical enablers” from the U.S. military, including special-operations forces, combat advisors, air and fire support, logistical and medevac support, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets. Underneath their increasingly boastful rhetoric, most Iraqi leaders—civilian and military—understand they are not fully capable of providing domestic order, combating terrorism or deterring external foes without some level of continued support from the U.S. military.

This provides the next president, as Robinson correctly observes, with important carrots and sticks—if he chooses to use them. As American forces continue to draw down and shift from a lead combat role to what the military calls “overwatch,” the new administration must make residual assistance to the ISF dependent on progress toward political accommodation, including full integration and employment of the SOIs, fair elections, efforts to address the needs of displaced persons and equitable service provision. Support should also be conditioned on commitment to the rule of law and Iraqi assurances that the ISF will not be used as a tool to advance sectarian agendas. And Robinson correctly points out that the next president should “ensure that the U.S. military is not put in the position of supporting sectarian actions.”

Implementing a new policy of strate-

gic conditionality also requires avoiding the impression that the United States seeks a permanent Korea-style military presence in Iraq, because doing so actually reverses the leverage the United States should have with the Iraqi government. Most Iraqi leaders want continued U.S. military support to the ISF for several years, but, with the exception of the Kurds, they do not desire a permanent presence. Consequently, if the next administration attempts to lay the groundwork for an indefinite military footprint, it would be forced to give in to Iraqi demands, rather than vice versa, in exchange for letting the United States stay.

As Robinson concludes, the next president must capitalize on the surge to “bring the war to a soft landing.” When charting this course,

The new president has the great advantage of starting with a clean slate and no special relationships or past commitments. He can adopt a new policy that builds on the successes achieved in 2007–2008 and provides the critical missing ingredients that can only be provided by presidential authority. The basic conceptual change needed is to change the paradigm from war-making to peace-making and to make achievement of the elusive political solution the policy’s central goal.

This is exactly right. Navigating a soft landing in Iraq entails more than “staying the course.” It will require the next commander in chief to manage an inevitable American drawdown in a way that produces political accord and sustainable stability in Iraq. And ultimately, that means developing a strategy, from day one, to hold Iraqi leaders accountable. □

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