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It's time to get out of Iraq

By David M. Edelstein and Ronald R. Krebs

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Since March 2003, an almost unquestioned consensus has dominated the debate on Iraq: Toppling Saddam Hussein without building a new, stable Iraq would harm the welfare of Iraqis and undermine America's foreign policy interests.

The time has come, however, to embrace an unpleasant alternative: the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces from Iraq as soon as possible after the Jan. 30 elections. Concrete withdrawal plans would send a clear signal to Iraqis that the United States is not a colonial power, and withdrawal would stem the occupation's growing hemorrhage of lives and dollars. Most important, it would allow the United States to rededicate its assets to the fight against the global terrorist network rather than continuing to expend them on the struggle against insurgents in Iraq.

Critics will protest that such a policy would leave behind a civil war in Iraq, create a safe haven for terrorists and damage U.S. credibility. But sectarian violence is already prevalent in Iraq, and Sunni insurgents are working hard to fan the flames of sectarianism. It may be only a matter of time until the U.S. is enmeshed in an Iraqi civil war, and there is little reason to think that persisting with the status quo will improve the situation.

A post-withdrawal Iraq mired in chaos is obviously not good news for the war on America's terrorist foes, but the occupation has undermined that more crucial project's prospects for success. It has diverted resources from operations against Al Qaeda, distracted American policymakers and intelligence officials, and given birth to legions of additional "jihadists" both within and outside Iraq.

The damage to U.S. credibility abroad has already been done. The American promise of delivering liberal democracy to Iraq expired long ago. The administration's continued assertions that Iraq is a marvelous, if somewhat troubled, success undermines American credibility far more than would withdrawal. In comparison, a firm commitment to a timely withdrawal would admit failure but at the same time begin to restore others' faith in America's foreign policy leadership.

Beyond that, however, the United States has already paid a high cost in Iraq. A decade

ago, when the United States turned tail in Somalia after the deaths of just 18 U.S. Army Rangers in the "Black Hawk Down" incident, America's adversaries were emboldened by the supposed lesson that the United States is casualty shy. After Iraq, there should be little doubt about the willingness of the United States to pay high costs in blood and treasure for a cause in which it believes.

In a sense, the critics are right: Withdrawal would carry with it immense costs--for Iraqis and for the United States. But the test of policy is not whether it is costly, for all policies are. The central question is whether it is less costly than the conceivable alternatives. Some have suggested that the U.S. must increase the number of troops it has stationed in Iraq, but ramping up forces to the levels envisioned by former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki is even more of a political non-starter today than it was before the war, when it cost Shinseki his job. Others propose that Iraq's January elections be pushed back to permit greater participation by the Sunni minority. This is a worthy goal, but delaying elections would likely only frustrate the Shiite majority and lead this even larger group to question the process' legitimacy.

We are not suggesting that the United States and its coalition partners abandon Iraq. The United States should continue to provide significant reconstruction aid, and it should help the new government become a responsible member of the international community. Washington should also offer to assist in the training of Iraqi Security Forces and provide military aid to the new government. All of this can and should be done, however, without large numbers of U.S. troops on the ground.

Secretary of State Colin Powell was right to cite the Pottery Barn rule--you break it, you bought it--in cautioning President Bush about the implications of invading Iraq. We agree that the United States has an ethical responsibility to help rebuild the shattered vessel that was Iraq. But, thanks to American clumsiness, that vessel has broken into so many pieces that putting it back together--let alone remolding it, as is the Bush administration's ambition--seems increasingly impossible. And again, thanks to American clumsiness, those shards are cutting ever deeper, as the latest large-scale attack on the U.S. military base in Mosul reminds us.

Rules exist for good reason. But all rules are meant to be broken--not lightly, but only after careful consideration. The Pottery Barn rule is no exception.

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