

"Exit Strategy"

The debate has shifted in the United States. It is no longer about the merits of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It is now about when and how the U.S. can withdraw its troops from Iraq, what is called "exit strategy." George Bush does continue to make speeches before ultra-friendly audiences saying that withdrawal now would embolden terrorists. But I think one should notice the "now" in his rhetoric. In any case, Bush's rhetoric is not going over very well. Even among his most ardent supporters, many are saying that the rhetoric is vacuous, and there is no concrete evidence offered of military or political progress for the U.S. position in Iraq. Indeed, every day the situation seems worse, with even the U.S.-backed Iraqi government's officials in Shi'ite Basra arresting British soldiers, who have to be rescued by force.

One has to pay attention when the quintessential Establishment voice on foreign policy in the United States, the review *Foreign Affairs*, runs an article in which the author is arguing that "the Bush doctrine has collapsed" and that consequently the government has no choice but to "embrace realism" and take a "pragmatic turn." And despite repeated statements by various people that U.S. troops may stay until 2009 or longer, Maj. General Douglas Lute, who is the director of operations of the U.S. Central Command (which oversees the occupation of Iraq) has now stated on the record that the U.S. will pull "significant numbers of troops out of Iraq in the next 12 months in spite of the continuing violence."

I think the strongest sign of a change in mood in the U.S. is that one of the candidates for the Republican party's presidential nomination in 2008, Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, says the U.S. is getting "more and more bogged down in Iraq," that the President should meet with Cindy Sheehan, and that the White House is "disconnected from reality and losing the war." It does not matter whether Hagel is right. The important thing is that he's running for the Republican nomination, and he must think that there are Republican voters who will respond to the validity of his analysis. Hagel is in fact moving faster than the leading Democratic politicians, except for Sen. Russell Feingold of Wisconsin, also a candidate for a presidential nomination, who has called officially for a withdrawal from Iraq by the end of 2006.

Further to the left, there are a number of groups now calling for immediate withdrawal. Their march on Washington was a clear success, with between 100,000 and 200,000 participants - not yet up to the anti-Vietnam War numbers, but then in this war, there are no middle-class draftees. Most of the soldiers are lower-class minorities and poor Whites. The latest polls show a three-way split in U.S. public opinion: one-third for total and immediate withdrawal; one-third wanting to reduce the number of troops, but not yet ready for total withdrawal; and one-third to "stay the course," as President Bush phrases it, or to stay in Iraq "until the job is done," as Vice-President Cheney puts it. This seems to mean a very long time. Those more in the political center want withdrawal by a fixed date. The *Observer* in London wrote recently that the British government is planning to withdraw substantial troops next spring. This was immediately denied by Tony Blair, but the *Observer* is not known for inventing stories.

The people in the Cheney camp are really unbudgeable and will simply continue to press their views. It is the debate between those who call for reduction of troops and/or withdrawal by a fixed date and those who call for immediate and total withdrawal that is more interesting. In recent weeks, virtually every major newspaper in the United States has been running editorials whose tenor is: The U.S. probably made a mistake in invading Iraq. But it now has

"responsibilities" not to leave precipitously, since that would result in a civil war. The so-called "moderates" (calling for withdrawal by a fixed date) argue that, even if the initial invasion was unjustified, the U.S. responsibility to the Iraqis is to help the U.S.-supported government maintain internal order, until it demonstrates it can do it by itself. This group brandishes the menace of total breakdown of national order in Iraq, civil war, and possible other outside invasions (by Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia).

The answer by those in favor of immediate withdrawal is quite simple. They argue that order has already broken down in Iraq, that the U.S. continued presence is one of the principal causes of this breakdown, that every additional day spent there worsens the situation rather than improves it. And finally they argue that a fixed future date provides no magic since the likelihood that the situation will be substantially different on that date from today is minimal.

The Bush regime has not only lost the war on the ground in Iraq. It is increasingly losing the support of the U.S. public, in a way that Bush may find irreparable.

by Immanuel Wallerstein