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A Risk Assessment

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It is easy to ignore the details of the plan the President outlined in his speech on May 24, 2004, and focus on domestic politics, the greater Middle East, or the events that have led to today's problems in Iraq. The critical issue over the weeks and months to come, however, is whether the President's plan can be made to work.

The critical portions of the President's speech are well worth reading several times because -- one way or another -- they outline as pragmatic a strategy as the US can hope to advance at this point in time. Whatever might have been, this is now. The US, Iraq, and the world must live with the fact and try to make the best of it.

The Understated Risks Affecting the President's Plan

The fact remains, however, that the President has outlined a high-risk strategy. President Bush did not address these risks in any detail or with any objectivity. Politics remain politics. The President's plan is the best game in town at this point in time because it is the only game in town -- at least until events force major changes.

At the same time, the President's plan has a 50-50 chance at best of playing out the way the President has laid out in his five point program. This plan could collapse at any point over the period it covers -- from now to early 2006.

President Bush continued to talk as if the US was a popular liberator, when polls conducted before the recent prison, Fallujah, and Al Sadr crises showed that 66% of Iraqi Sunni Arabs felt the war had shamed Iraq, and 33% supported violence against the CPA and Coalition troops, and the figures for nearly 13% supported violence. He ignored more recent CPA polls indicating that more than 80% wanted the US and Coalition troops to leave immediately. In many areas, Iraq is a hostile environment.

Another problem the President did not really address is the lack of anything approaching a popular government a little over a month before the transfer of power. It is easy to talk about Iraqis wanting democracy, but public opinion polls show that they do not understand what this means, that no current leaders or parties command a significant popular following, and that Iraqis really want physical and financial security and effective governance -- even if this means a strong man.

Polls also consistently show there is a risk of civil war. They reflect deep divisions between Arab Sunni and Shi'ite, Arab and Kurd, and over the role of religion in government. They reveal that most Iraqis want the Coalition out as of June 30th. They show that two thirds of Arab Sunnis and one third of Arab Shi'ites feel the war shamed

Iraq, and that there is broad support for violence against the Coalition -- more than 12% of all Arab Shi'ites and roughly one third of Arab Sunnis believe such attacks are justified.

Another poll by the Iraqi Center for Research and Strategic Studies, conducted during April 20-27, illustrates the level of political uncertainty involved:

- 43% felt they would be more safe if the Coalition left at once while 29% said less safe;
- 88.5% saw Coalition forces as an occupying force, rather than a liberating force;
- 52% felt that the immediate departure of all Coalition forces would be very effective in improving security versus 7.1% who felt this would happen if a great number of Coalition forces stayed, and 14.2% who felt this would happen if the Coalition withdrew to fewer bases. (76% felt this would happen if all authority was transferred to an Iraqi government, and 70% if more Iraqi security forces were hired and trained.);
- 54% had an unfavorable view of political parties and 52% had an unfavorable view of the Interim Governing Council; although 77% said they would participate in an election/ Some 76% had an unfavorable view of the CPA, and 41% had an unfavorable view of the UN.
- 84% felt Coalition forces should not patrol Iraqi streets after June 30th, and 76% felt that if they stayed, they should move to bases away from towns;
- 67% stated they did not adequately understand the Interim Administrative Law, at least 35% did not understand key provisions, and 46% said it gave too much power to minorities;
- 81.5% felt the Coalition went into Fallujah to "punish the population," 53% felt the Coalition closed Sadr's paper to stop it from criticizing the Coalition, and 48% believe the Coalition tried to arrest Sadr to weaken him. 66% believed the Sunni insurgents and Sadr's militia had joined forces.

For full details, go to icrs1@hotmail.com. The poll covered seven major cities and sampled 1,640.

Even so, Iraq is scarcely a hopeless environment. A majority of Iraqis may still be willing to live with the President's plan, in spite of their hostility to US and British occupation, due to the expanded role of the UN, the greatly expanded definition of Iraqi sovereignty, their need for security, and their need for aid. Equally important, there has been no broad tilt towards civil war or ethnic and religious conflict. At the same time, Iraq is a far more uncertain and dangerous environment than President Bush was willing to admit, and the end result is far more uncertain.

The Risks in Step One: "Transfer of full sovereignty to a government of Iraqi citizens who will prepare the way for national elections"

One critical set of risks is centered on the transfer of power on June 30th. The UN can name the players in the new interim government. The Iraqis, however, have to agree to the names, the power sharing involved, and the role the government actually plays. They have not yet done so, and any agreement can fall apart at any time over disputes over

power sharing, ethnic and religious differences, money, the role of outside powers, security, etc.

America's role is also uncertain. It is wise to say that, "Our embassy in Baghdad will have the same purpose as any other American embassy, to assure good relations with a sovereign nation. America and other countries will continue to provide technical experts to help Iraq's ministries of government, but these ministries will report to Iraq's new prime minister." It is quite another thing to go from the role of a sobering CPA to the role of advisor "prima inter pares" and make it work.

The fact remains that no one knows how well the new president, two vice presidents, a prime minister, and the 26 Iraqi ministers will oversee government departments -- from health to justice to defense -- will work together and govern. No one knows the politics and views of the new national council to be chosen in July by Iraqis "representing their country's diversity." It is fine to say that this interim government will exercise full sovereignty until national elections are held, but who actually exercises what actual degree of sovereignty to do what?

The actual ability to exercise effective governance is also far more uncertain than the President admitted. There may be twelve government ministries are currently under the direct control of Iraqis, but none are really functioning effectively, the 18 governates remain another critical problem in governance, and so do most local governments. The failure to provide a clear plan for developing effective governance that provides local security and services for Iraqis is a key flaw in the President's program.

Everything ultimately depends on the extent that Iraqis can now cope with these problems, and reach functioning compromises that will allow the new government to exercise power in ways that win the hearts and minds of their fellow citizens and give the new government popular legitimacy.

This is a critical point that President Bush did make quite clearly: "Iraqis are proud people who resent foreign control of their affairs, just as we would. After decades under the tyrant, they are also reluctant to trust authority. By keeping our promise on June 30th, the coalition will demonstrate that we have no interest in occupation. And full sovereignty will give Iraqis a direct interest in the success of their own government. Iraqis will know that when they build a school or repair a bridge, they're not working for the Coalition Provisional Authority, they are working for themselves. And when they patrol the streets of Baghdad, or engage radical militias, they will be fighting for their own country." This is the key reason for hope, but it is scarcely a certainty.

The Risks in Step Two: “Help establish the stability and security that democracy requires.”

Public opinion polls show that the Iraqi people do not agree with President Bush that “Coalition forces and the Iraqi people have the same enemies -- the terrorists, illegal militia, and Saddam loyalists who stand between the Iraqi people and their future as a free nation. Working as allies, we will defend Iraq and defeat these enemies.” Even CPA polls consistently show that Iraqis oppose the coalition.

The President effectively admitted this in saying that,

“America will provide forces and support necessary for achieving these goals. Our commanders had estimated that a troop level below 115,000 would be sufficient at this point in the conflict. Given the recent increase in violence, we'll maintain our troop level at the current 138,000 as long as necessary...General Abizaid and other commanders in Iraq are constantly assessing the level of troops they need to fulfill the mission. If they need more troops, I will send them. The mission of our forces in Iraq is demanding and dangerous. Our troops are showing exceptional skill and courage. I thank them for their sacrifices and their duty.”

The good and bad news are the same: The insurgent and Islamic opposition is so strong that it has led the President to make an open-ended Presidential commitment to maintaining large forces in Iraq.

At the same time, the President only sketched out the bare bones of a future security strategy in Iraq. The President stated that,

“In the city of Fallujah, there's been considerable violence by Saddam loyalists and foreign fighters, including the murder of four American contractors. American soldiers and Marines could have used overwhelming force. Our commanders, however, consulted with Iraq's Governing Council and local officials, and determined that massive strikes against the enemy would alienate the local population, and increase support for the insurgency. So we have pursued a different approach. We're making security a shared responsibility in Fallujah. Coalition commanders have worked with local leaders to create an all-Iraqi security force, which is now patrolling the city. Our soldiers and Marines will continue to disrupt enemy attacks on our supply routes, conduct joint patrols with Iraqis to destroy bomb factories and safe houses, and kill or capture any enemy.

We want Iraqi forces to gain experience and confidence in dealing with their country's enemies. We want the Iraqi people to know that we trust their growing capabilities, even as we help build them. At the same time, Fallujah must cease to be a sanctuary for the enemy, and those responsible for terrorism will be held to account.”

The reality is that the US has effectively had to give up on securing Fallujah in return for relative quiet in the city (although scarcely around it) and cede control to ex-Ba'athists. This is not an example of success. It instead raises serious questions about what security means, the future disarming of Iraqi civilians and militias, and security in any elections in which any hostile faction resorts to violence, rather than accepts the political process.

President Bush never mentioned the Kurdish issue and the “soft” ethnic cleansing in areas like Kirkuk. He also effectively ignored the broader problems in dealing with Shi’ites. He focused on Sadr, and stated that,

“In the cities of Najaf and Karbala and Kufa, most of the violence has been incited by a young, radical cleric who commands an illegal militia. These enemies have been hiding behind an innocent civilian population, storing arms and ammunition in mosques, and launching attacks from holy shrines. Our soldiers have treated religious sites with respect, while systematically dismantling the illegal militia. We’re also seeing Iraqis, themselves, take more responsibility for restoring order.

...After June 30th, American and other forces will still have important duties. American military forces in Iraq will operate under American command as a part of a multinational force authorized by the United Nations. Iraq’s new sovereign government will still face enormous security challenges, and our forces will be there to help.”

He did not address the key political problems in forging the kind of unity between Arab Shi’ite, Arab Sunni, Kurd, and other minorities critical to avoiding civil war. He left the nature of the new UN command he mentioned unclear. He also left the future role of the Iraqi government in shaping US operations unclear, the status of forces unclear, and decisions over rules of engagement unclear.

He did not mention the fact the new Iraqi government will control the security forces and be able to opt out of US-led operations, or describe the limits on its future ability to veto and review US plans. He simply stated that, “As challenges arise in Fallujah, Najaf, and elsewhere, the tactics of our military will be flexible. Commanders on the ground will pay close attention to local conditions. And we will do all that is necessary -- by measured force or overwhelming force -- to achieve a stable Iraq.”

What is more reassuring, is that President Bush clearly recognized that creating effective Iraqi security forces, and giving the Iraqis the maximum possible control over their own security as quickly as possible, should have the highest priority.

“We’ve learned from these failures, and we’ve taken steps to correct them. Successful fighting units need a sense of cohesion, so we’ve lengthened and intensified their training. Successful units need to know they are fighting for the future of their own country, not for any occupying power, so we are ensuring that Iraqi forces serve under an Iraqi chain of command. Successful fighting units need the best possible leadership, so we improved the vetting and training of Iraqi officers and senior enlisted men.

At my direction, and with the support of Iraqi authorities, we are accelerating our program to help train Iraqis to defend their country. A new team of senior military officers is now assessing every unit in Iraq’s security forces. I’ve asked this team to oversee the training of a force of 260,000 Iraqi soldiers, police, and other security personnel. Five Iraqi army battalions are in the field now, with another eight battalions to join them by July the 1st. The eventual goal is an Iraqi army of 35,000 soldiers in 27 battalions, fully prepared to defend their country.”

Unfortunately, the President gave some very unrealistic dates for fielding effective new Iraqi army forces, and no clear dates for when anything like a 260,000 man mix of forces can be properly trained and equipped. He did not address the problems of the militia, or the many tribal, ethnic, and sectarian problems that may divide any Iraq security force. He did not describe clear plans for rushing in more aid in training, or the equipment and facilities the Iraqi security forces need without further contractual delays. He expressed the right intentions; he did not define a credible plan.

Once again, enough progress has been made to show there is real hope if the US really does rush in effective training help and equipment, if the Iraqi government holds together, if the UN passes the right resolutions, and if the insurgents do not gain strength. At the same time, it is all too clear that risks remain extremely serious.

The Risks in Step Three: “Continue rebuilding that nation's infrastructure, so that a free Iraq can quickly gain economic independence and a better quality of life.”

While President Bush's plan represented real progress towards realism in many areas, it repeated one of the most dangerously disingenuous aspects of past US claims about progress in Iraq -- the economic news was all good news:

“Our coalition has already helped Iraqis to rebuild schools and refurbish hospitals and health clinics, repair bridges, upgrade the electrical grid, and modernize the communications system. And now a growing private economy is taking shape. A new currency has been introduced. Iraq's Governing Council approved a new law that opens the country to foreign investment for the first time in decades. Iraq has liberalized its trade policy, and today an Iraqi observer attends meetings of the World Trade Organization. Iraqi oil production has reached more than two million barrels per day, bringing revenues of nearly \$6 billion so far this year, which is being used to help the people of Iraq. And thanks in part to our efforts -- to the efforts of former Secretary of State James Baker, many of Iraq's largest creditors have pledged to forgive or substantially reduce Iraqi debt incurred by the former regime.

We're making progress. Yet there still is much work to do. Over the decades of Saddam's rule, Iraq's infrastructure was allowed to crumble, while money was diverted to palaces, and to wars, and to weapons programs. We're urging other nations to contribute to Iraqi reconstruction -- and 37 countries and the IMF and the World Bank have so far pledged \$13.5 billion in aid. America has dedicated more than \$20 billion to reconstruction and development projects in Iraq. To ensure our money is spent wisely and effectively, our new embassy in Iraq will have regional offices in several key cities. These offices will work closely with Iraqis at all levels of government to help make sure projects are completed on time and on budget.

A new Iraq will also need a humane, well-supervised prison system. Under the dictator, prisons like Abu Ghraib were symbols of death and torture. That same prison became a symbol of disgraceful conduct by a few American troops who dishonored our country and disregarded our values. America will fund the construction of a modern, maximum-security prison. When that prison is completed, detainees at Abu Ghraib will be relocated. Then, with the approval of the Iraqi government, we will demolish the Abu Ghraib prison, as a fitting symbol of Iraq's new beginning.”

The facts are different. An Iraqi middle class has effectively profited from the opening up of Iraq, the flow of coalition aid and oil revenues, and a lack of tariffs. The CPA has made virtually no progress, however, in carrying out broad structural reforms of Iraq's command economy and state industries. Moreover, it has failed to work out any meaningful mid and long-term plan for the energy sector, and has left the agricultural sector in virtually the same command-dominated mess it was in when the US arrived.

Short-term aid projects, old state industries, and government, a bubble in the service sector, and temporary grants and subsidies, dominate jobs. There is no momentum as yet behind the broad structural reforms vital to creating stable jobs and economic growth. Moreover, the "goal" for most aid efforts is often simply what happened under Saddam plus a few major fixes.

The President implied "oil wealth" from uncertain oil revenues, when total near term oil revenues are unlikely to meet one-third of Iraq's needs and per capita oil revenues are a fraction of what they were in 1980 (their peak year). He also ignored the fact that much of Iraq's infrastructure has not grown in proportion to its population since the early days of the Iran-Iraq War and is sized more to a nation of 16 million people than one of 25-26 million.

In fairness to the President, the scale of these problems has been disguised by CPA reports that talk in Stalinist terms about total power generated, total schools, etc., but not about what Iraqis actually receive on the ground, the ability to meet requirements, how Iraqis perceive the result, and problems in effectively distributing the aid. To date, the US has produced far more statistical nonsense than useful reporting.

While US military (CERF) and emergency aid is reaching Iraqis and creating facts on the ground, the overall US aid process is an ineffective mess limited by contracting methods that prevent rapid and effective action, and are implemented largely by foreigners. The CPA and USAID have proved incapable of formulating effective plans, and money and authority have not been given to the Iraqi Ministries. More than 20% of expenditures in Iraq are going to security.

In short, the President left the Iraqi economy and the critical area of jobs a virtual black box with no signs of a plan to really fix critical problems. He exaggerated probable aid (pledges are rarely met and loans are not real aid), and mentioned nothing regarding the requirements for aid, fixing the US aid process, or the probable need for major additional US aid in FY2005 and FY2006.

The Risks in Step Four: "Our plan is to enlist additional international support for Iraq's transition."

The good news is that the President is now firmly committed to internationalizing the situation in Iraq:

“At every stage, the United States has gone to the United Nations -- to confront Saddam Hussein, to promise serious consequences for his actions, and to begin Iraqi reconstruction. Today, the United States and Great Britain presented a new resolution in the Security Council to help move Iraq toward self-government. I've directed Secretary Powell to work with fellow members of the Council to endorse the timetable the Iraqis have adopted, to express international support for Iraq's interim government, to reaffirm the world's security commitment to the Iraqi people, and to encourage other U.N. members to join in the effort. Despite past disagreements, most nations have indicated strong support for the success of a free Iraq. And I'm confident they will share in the responsibility of assuring that success.

Next month, at the NATO summit in Istanbul, I will thank our 15 NATO allies who together have more than 17,000 troops on the ground in Iraq. Great Britain and Poland are each leading a multinational division that is securing important parts of the country. And NATO, itself, is giving helpful intelligence, communications, and logistical support to the Polish-led division. At the summit, we will discuss NATO's role in helping Iraq build and secure its democracy.”

The bad news is that the UN Resolution is coming roughly a year late, is still not approved, and the resulting UN role is not defined. Intent to internationalize, and even a UN resolution, is not a plan and is certainly not a clearly defined role and set of facts on the ground.

The reference to NATO also ignores the fact the US has still not changed the minds of Belgium, France, and Germany or received any serious pledges of new allied forces or commitments for long-term deployments from the governments that already have forces in Iraq. NATO may well be a better political cover for the US and British role – if all of the key members who opposed the war agree – but it will not ease the US or British military burden.

Once again, good intentions but no real plan.

The Risks in Step Five: “the most important step is free, national elections, to be held no later than next January.”

Many Americans may have missed one of the President's key points: It is going to take until 2006 for a permanent Iraqi government to come into place, even if Iraqis follow the US plan:

“A United Nations team, headed by Carina Perelli, is now in Iraq, helping form an independent election commission that will oversee an orderly, accurate national election. In that election, the Iraqi people will choose a transitional national assembly, the first freely-elected, truly representative national governing body in Iraq's history. This assembly will serve as Iraq's legislature, and it will choose a transitional government with executive powers. The transitional national assembly will also draft a new constitution, which will be presented to the Iraqi people in a referendum scheduled for the fall of 2005. Under this new constitution, Iraq will elect a permanent government by the end of next year.”

President Bush almost certainly has set the right goals for creating a more stable and unified Iraq. The practical problem is that even if Iraq can make it smoothly through step

one, there will be nearly two years of changes in which personal struggles for power, and all of Iraq's ethnic and religious tensions can derail or radically change the US plan, lead to a new "strong leader," or cause some form of civil conflict.

This does not mean a risk assessment should predict failure. So far, Iraqis have shown a relatively strong sense of nationhood, have been reasonably pragmatic, and have avoided the kinds of conflicts that could lead to civil fighting. Iraq is, however, a political vacuum left by more than thirty years of tyranny, and has never had to share power with any equity among its major factions. Losers in the struggle for power, and those who want to dominate rather than share, are going to have many opportunities for spoiler efforts to block political progress and/or to try to use violence and terrorism. The period of high risk will almost certainly extend deep into 2006, which is the earliest point at which the elected permanent government can demonstrate that it is both popular and can govern effectively.