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State of the Union 2007: A New Way Forward in Iraq

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President Bush's State of the Union address underscored that the war in Iraq is an integral part of the broader war against terrorism. A defeat in Iraq would allow al-Qaeda and other hostile forces to establish a dangerous base in the heart of the Arab world. Speaking before a new Congress that appears to favor an exit strategy, he appealed for bipartisan support for his strategy for victory, reminding legislators, "Whatever you voted for, you did not vote for failure."

The President acknowledged that the situation in Iraq deteriorated in 2006, following progress in 2005. Despite the many difficulties faced in Iraq, he warned that the consequences of failure would be catastrophic: "We did not drive al-Qaeda out of a safe haven in Afghanistan only to permit them to establish a safe haven in Iraq."

Although some critics of the Administration, such as Senator James Webb (D-VA), who delivered the Democratic response, contend that the war in Iraq is a distraction from the war on terrorism, it is clear that al-Qaeda does not agree with them. Last week Lieutenant General Michael Maples, the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, revealed in testimony to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that documents captured at a safehouse in Iraq indicated that the al-Qaeda in Iraq organization was planning to launch terrorist attacks inside the United States.¹

Such threats are likely to multiply and grow more lethal if the United States turns its back on Iraq, just as they did after the United States turned its back on Afghanistan after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal from that country.

The President's state of the union speech did not provide as much detail about his Iraq plan as his "New Way Forward" speech earlier in the month, which called for greater U.S. and Iraqi military efforts, increased Iraqi action to reach a national reconciliation, and joint efforts to jumpstart the Iraqi economy and create jobs.

Much discussion before the address focused on the proposed surge of U.S. troops, which would add 21,500 troops to the approximately 132,000 already deployed in Iraq. But more important than the numbers is the new strategy that the additional troops would carry out and the interweaving of the military effort with a broader political strategy to reconcile Iraq's warring factions and suffocate the insurgency.

A surge of U.S. troops could enhance security in Baghdad, the center of gravity of the struggle in Iraq. But unless the surge is accompanied by a sustained surge of Iraqi forces, the security gains will only be temporary. But it remains to be seen whether the Iraqi government, which has defaulted on past pledges to mobilize troops for operations in Baghdad, will deliver on its promises this time. President Bush believes that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government is up to the task. Let us hope that he is right.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/MiddleEast/wm1322.cfm

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The Bush Administration's revised strategy on Iraq is a calculated gamble. It will entail greater American casualties in the short run but could save many American and Iraqi lives in the long run, if successful. Although Bush's new course cannot guarantee success, the preferred policy of most of his critics—a rapid withdrawal—can guarantee failure. Such an abdication of responsibility would lead swiftly to a strategic, moral, and humanitarian

catastrophe that would severely undermine the war against terrorism and efforts to contain Iran for decades to come.

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1. Lieutenant General Michael Maples, "Current and Projected National Security Threats to the United States," Statement before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 11, 2007, p. 8, at <http://intelligence.senate.gov/070111/maples.pdf>.