

McCaffrey Paints Gloomy Picture of Iraq

In Contrast to His Previous Views, Retired General Writes of 'Strategic Peril'

By [Thomas E. Ricks](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, March 28, 2007; Page A11

An influential retired Army general released a dire assessment of the situation in [Iraq](#), based on a recent round of meetings there with Gen. David H. Petraeus and 16 other senior U.S. commanders.

"The population is in despair," retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey wrote in an eight-page document compiled in his capacity as a professor at West Point. "Life in many of the urban areas is now desperate."

McCaffrey is widely respected in the military, having fought in the Vietnam War, commanded a division in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and later served as the commander for U.S. military operations in Central America and South America. After retiring, he became President Bill Clinton's director of drug policy.

McCaffrey, who has met twice with President Bush to discuss the war, most recently in December, was scheduled to brief White House officials on his conclusions late yesterday.

His report also lists several reasons for some new optimism, noting that since the arrival of Petraeus last month, "the situation on the ground has clearly and measurably improved."

Nevertheless, his bottom line is that the U.S. military is in "strategic peril" -- a sharp contrast to his previous views. In 2005, he concluded in a similar report that "momentum is now clearly with the Iraqi government and coalition security forces." In a 2006 assessment, he wrote: "It was very encouraging for me to see the progress achieved in the past year."

The retired general, who on his latest visit also interviewed a U.S. intelligence official and some Iraqi officers, is especially critical of the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. It is "despised" by the Sunnis, he writes, is seen as "untrustworthy and incompetent" by the Kurds, and now enjoys "little credibility among the Shia populations from which it emerged."

The government lacks dominance in every province, he added. One result is that "no Iraqi government official, coalition soldier, diplomat, reporter, foreign NGO [nongovernmental

[Enlarge This Photo](#)



In a document that he compiled as a professor at West Point, retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey wrote of Iraq: "The population is in despair." (By Alex Wong -- Getty Images For "Meet The Press")

RELATED DOCUMENT

[Gen. McCaffrey's Report](#) (pdf)

SPECIAL REPORT

organization], nor contractor can walk the streets of Baghdad, nor Mosul, nor Kirkuk, nor Basra, nor Tikrit, nor Najaf, nor Ramadi, without heavily armed protection."

Militias and armed bands are "in some ways more capable of independent operations" than the Iraqi army, he added.

McCaffrey is gloomy about the continuing strength of the insurgency. At this point, he said, about 27,000 fighters are being held, and at least 20,000 others have been killed, yet enemy combatants continue to produce new leaders and foot soldiers. The result, five years into the war, he said, is that "their sophistication, numbers and lethality go up -- not down -- as they incur these staggering battle losses."

Among McCaffrey's reasons for new optimism were that the Maliki government is permitting the United States to attack rogue leaders in the Mahdi Army of radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Also, he noted that U.S. and Iraqi forces have changed their basic approach to operations, with soldiers now living on small outposts across Baghdad. Iraqi forces also are better equipped than before. In Anbar province, he noted, "There is a real and growing groundswell of Sunni tribal opposition to the al-Qaeda-in-Iraq terror formations."

So, he concluded, it is still possible to develop a stable Iraq. But, he added, "We have very little time left." The dilemma facing the U.S. government, he said, is that U.S. forces probably will have to be reduced substantially within three years, but the insurgency will go on for many years more.

McCaffrey's assessment contrasts with other recent reports on Iraq by visiting experts.

Former Australian military officer David Kilcullen, who is advising Petraeus on counterinsurgency methods, recently commented on the Web site of Small Wars Journal: "It is still early days for Fardh al-Qanoon (a.k.a. the 'Baghdad Security Plan') and thus too soon to tell for sure how things will play out. But, though the challenges remain extremely severe, early trends are quite positive." He added that "the general trajectory of the campaign seems to be changing, in subtle ways that may yet prove decisive."