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## **No Choice: Stay The Course In Iraq**

***U.S. leadership deserves support for one last effort to succeed, says a retired Army general.***

By Barry R. McCaffrey

IRAQ IS BEING ripped apart by a low-grade civil war compounded by a dysfunctional, Shiite-dominated government. As many as 3,000 Iraqis are being killed or kidnapped a month, and American forces have suffered more than 27,000 killed and wounded. But we have little choice as Americans except to give our new military commander, Gen. David H. Petraeus, and our new ambassador, Ryan C. Crocker, the political and military support they need during the next 12 months. Failure in Iraq at this point could generate a regional war among Iraq's neighbors that would imperil U.S. interests for a decade or more.

I just returned from a week in Iraq and Kuwait, visiting combat units in the field as well as senior U.S., coalition and Iraqi officials. I was sent by the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where I'm an adjunct professor, to do a strategic and operational assessment of security operations there. I know that the problems we face are grim indeed, but Petraeus' strategy is sound, and the situation is not hopeless.

Our troops face thousands of attacks each month from Sunni and Shiite Arabs employing improvised explosive devices (more than 2,900 a month), snipers, rocket and mortar fire, mines and, recently, suicide truck bombings rigged to release noxious chlorine gas. The "burn rate" on the Iraq war is \$9 billion a month. The Iraqis are in despair. Three million are refugees or have fled the country. The ill-equipped Iraqi police and army suffered 49,000 casualties in the last 14 months. There is no security in most of the country under the government of Prime Minister Nouri Maliki.

The threat we face is huge. More than 100,000 armed militia members and insurgents confront central authorities. A handful of foreign fighters (about 500) and a couple of thousand Al-Qaeda-in-Iraq extremists provoke sectarian violence through murderous attacks on the innocent civilian Shiite population and their mosques. This provokes a response of brutality and ethnic cleansing against the vulnerable Sunni civilian population.

U.S. forces have arrested more than 120,000 suspects and hold more than 27,000 as detainees. We have killed about 20,000 of these armed fighters. However, the armed struggle shows few signs of disruption.

Iraq's neighbors, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, have intensified the civil war as an extension of their own larger Shiite-Sunni conflict for power — or as a

reaction to the presence of a foreign presence in Iraq. This war is primarily an internal struggle, with the preponderance of the leadership, fighters, money and armaments generated inside Iraq.

However, there is no question that Iran has provided the Shiites with leadership from the elite Quds Force of its Revolutionary Guard and with highly lethal EFP (explosively formed projectile) bombs, which are a major cause of U.S. casualties. The Syrians have provided sanctuary to Saddam Hussein Baathists. The Syrians also have ignored or aided the passage of 40 to 70 jihadists a month into Iraq. (Most of them are suicide bombers who are dead within two weeks.) The Turks also have made threatening military and political moves to confront the prosperous Iraqi Kurdish regions at their border.

This is a dangerous neighborhood.

What is the basis for hope? U.S. troops continue to show determination, discipline and courage. We will have organized 370,000 members of the Iraqi police and army, in 120 battalions, by the end of the year. The Maliki government has finally gotten its nerve and allowed joint operations by its police and U.S. special operations forces to arrest Sadr militia members in Baghdad. Petraeus has placed more than 50 Iraqi/U.S. police and army strong points throughout the city. The murder rate has plummeted in response. The Sunni tribes in Anbar province have turned on the foreign fighters.

We will know by the end of the summer if Petraeus' strategy is going to prompt an adequate political response from the Iraqis. Only through the success of reconciliation talks can the bitter civil strife be moderated. We are running out of time.

The American people have walked away from support of this war. The Army is beginning to show signs of great strain. Many units are now on their third combat tour, and the tours are being routinely extended. Recruiting standards are being lowered. Our equipment is shot. By the beginning of the coming year, we will be forced to downsize our deployment to Iraq or the Army will begin to unravel.

The United States is now at a crossroads. We are in a position of strategic peril. We need to support the U.S. leadership team in Iraq for this one last effort to succeed.

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