

Annotate This: Escalation in Iraq

The mistakes that the president acknowledged in his speech are perpetuated in his plan.
Foreign Policy In Focus | January 11, 2007, By [Stephen Zunes](#)

On January 10, George W. Bush finally delivered a speech on his new Iraq policy. Originally planned for before Christmas, the plan's chief element—an increase in U.S. soldiers on the ground—received much criticism and was therefore postponed. The speech has already drawn negative responses from senior House Democrats, who have vowed to block funding for the increase in troops, from the American public, 61% of whom oppose the build-up, and was skeptically received by some key Republicans. The Arab world, too, has voiced doubts about the plan.

Stephen Zunes kicks off a new FPIF feature—Annotate This—with a close reading of the Bush speech. He dissects the arguments one by one and demonstrates that the mistakes that the president acknowledges in his speech are perpetuated in his plan. The Bush speech is in italics. Commentary by Stephen Zunes follows.

“Tonight in Iraq, the Armed Forces of the United States are engaged in a struggle that will determine the direction of the global war on terror—and our safety here at home. The new strategy I outline tonight will change America’s course in Iraq, and help us succeed in the fight against terror.”

The broad consensus among strategic analysts, including those in the U.S. military and intelligence agencies, is that the struggle engaged by the U.S. armed forces, despite their enormous sacrifices, has compromised efforts to counter international terrorism and has made America less safe. If succeeding in the fight against terrorism was really the administration's goal, President Bush would call for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq .

“When I addressed you just over a year ago, nearly 12 million Iraqis had cast their ballots for a unified and democratic nation. The elections of 2005 were a stunning achievement. We thought that these elections would bring the Iraqis together—and that as we trained Iraqi security forces, we could accomplish our mission with fewer American troops.”

As many analysts pointed out at the time, the timing and circumstances of the U.S.-organized elections actually strengthened sectarian divisions and the mere training of Iraqi armed forces—large elements of which are more loyal to various political, ethnic, and sectarian factions than they are to a unified Iraq—would not result in a stable and democratic society.

“But in 2006, the opposite happened. The violence in Iraq—particularly in Baghdad—overwhelmed the political gains the Iraqis had made. Al-Qaida terrorists and Sunni insurgents recognized the mortal danger that Iraq’s elections posed for their cause. And they responded with outrageous acts of murder aimed at innocent Iraqis. They blew up one of the holiest shrines in Shia Islam—the Golden Mosque of Samarra—in a calculated effort to provoke Iraq’s Shia population to retaliate. Their strategy worked. Radical Shia elements, some supported by Iran, formed death squads. And the result was a vicious cycle of sectarian violence that continues today.”

Elements of the insurgency have indeed deliberately provoked sectarian conflict. However, it is important to remember that until the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation, Iraq had maintained a longstanding history of secularism and a strong national identity among its Arab population despite its sectarian differences. Top analysts in the CIA and State Department, as well as large numbers of Middle East experts, warned that a U.S. invasion of Iraq could result in a violent ethnic and sectarian conflict, but this apparently did not seem to bother

the Bush administration. U.S. occupation authorities—in an apparent effort to divide and rule—encouraged sectarianism by dividing up authority based not on technical skills or ideological affiliation but ethnic and religious identity. As with Lebanon, however, such efforts have actually exacerbated divisions, with virtually every political question debated not on its merits but on which group it potentially benefits or harms. This has led to great instability, with political parties, parliamentary blocs, and government ministries breaking down along sectarian lines.

Iraq's Sunni Arab minority, regardless of their feelings about Saddam Hussein's regime, has long identified with Arab nationalism and distrusts the pro-Iranian links of much of the Shiite leadership. These affiliations have led many Sunni Arabs to support the insurgency. Seeing their government faced with a growing insurgency and their community falling victim to terrorist violence, the Shiites have responded with aggressive counter-insurgency and counter-terrorist operations against the Sunni community, primarily targeting civilians, with U.S. forces unable or unwilling to stop it. In short, President Bush is essentially blaming the victims rather than acknowledging the U.S. role in the country's disintegration along sectarian lines.

“The situation in Iraq is unacceptable to the American people—and it is unacceptable to me. Our troops in Iraq have fought bravely. They have done everything we have asked them to do. Where mistakes have been made, the responsibility rests with me.”

It is refreshing for President Bush to finally acknowledge that he has made mistakes and to accept responsibility. However, based on his proposed plans to address the situation he is primarily responsible for causing, it is obvious that he has not learned from those mistakes. The key lesson not learned is that the invasion by Western forces of an Arab country has always led to violent resistance. The larger the force, the greater the violent resistance.

“It is clear that we need to change our strategy in Iraq. So my national security team, military commanders, and diplomats conducted a comprehensive review. We consulted Members of Congress from both parties, allies abroad, and distinguished outside experts. We benefited from the thoughtful recommendations of the Iraq Study Group—a bipartisan panel led by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton. In our discussions, we all agreed that there is no magic formula for success in Iraq. And one message came through loud and clear: Failure in Iraq would be a disaster for the United States.”

The message from the vast majority of military commanders, diplomats, members of Congress, allied governments, and outside experts, as well as the Iraq Study Group, was also loud and clear: that escalation was a very bad idea and would increase the likelihood of failure. And President Bush appears to have simply ignored the vast majority of the Iraq Study Group's recommendations.

“The consequences of failure are clear: Radical Islamic extremists would grow in strength and gain new recruits.”

It is in the ongoing presence of U.S. occupation forces and their bloody counter-insurgency war that has strengthened the hand of radical Islamic extremists and helped them gain new recruits. Radical Islamic extremists were not a significant factor in Iraq until after the United States invaded and occupied that country in 2003, setting off a nationalist reaction taken advantage of by extremist elements. But Bush overemphasizes their importance. Numbering only 1,000-2,000 out of a total of 20,000-30,000 insurgents, the radicals are a small part of the problem in Iraq. Additional U.S. forces will make it even easier for them to further take advantage of popular Iraqi discontent over American military operations in their country.

“They would be in a better position to topple moderate governments, create chaos in the region, and use oil revenues to fund their ambitions.”

It has been the popular reaction in the Arab world to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, along with U.S. support for pro-Western Arab dictatorships, and U.S. support for the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and this summer's attack on Lebanon that is primarily responsible for stirring up the instability and extremism threatening moderate governments. The phenomenon of radical Islamic extremism does not occur in a vacuum but is a reaction to perceived injustices and violence against Muslim peoples. The prospects of increased chaos in the region, then, does not come from some kind of centralized Radical Islam International being set up in Iraq to stir up trouble elsewhere. Rather, it comes from sectarian conflict and anti-American extremism resulting from the indefinite continuation of the U.S. war and occupation. In addition, the prospects of Islamic extremists controlling Iraq's oil revenues are pretty far-fetched. Currently, they are busy blowing up pipelines and other parts of the country's petroleum infrastructure. Finally, the irony is that the funding for most of al-Qaida's operations has come, at least indirectly, through oil revenues, not from Iraq, but from the U.S.-backed regime in Saudi Arabia.

"Iran would be emboldened in its pursuit of nuclear weapons."

Iran's nuclear program started with U.S. support in the 1950s, and its possible nuclear weapons ambitions pre-date the rise of the Iraqi insurgency. Whether Iran does develop nuclear weapons will depend far more on the policies pursued by the United States and Israel—nuclear states that Iran sees as threatening its national security—than what happens in Iraq.

"Our enemies would have a safe haven from which to plan and launch attacks on the American people. On September the 11th, 2001, we saw what a refuge for extremists on the other side of the world could bring to the streets of our own cities."

Except for a tiny enclave in the autonomous Kurdish region outside of Baghdad's control, there were virtually no al-Qaida-affiliated activities in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion in 2003. If preventing the establishment of a safe haven for extremist groups that could attack the United States was really his goal, Bush would have never ordered the invasion of Iraq in the first place. In any case, elements allied with al-Qaida only represent a tiny fraction of the Iraq insurgency. Finally, it should also be noted that the 9/11 hijackers largely came from cells based in Germany and learned how to fly planes in the United States . They did not come from a Middle Eastern sanctuary.

"For the safety of our people, America must succeed in Iraq. The most urgent priority for success in Iraq is security, especially in Baghdad. Eighty percent of Iraq's sectarian violence occurs within 30 miles of the capital. This violence is splitting Baghdad into sectarian enclaves, and shaking the confidence of all Iraqis. Only the Iraqis can end the sectarian violence and secure their people. And their government has put forward an aggressive plan to do it."

It is highly dubious whether the U.S.-backed Iraqi government's current "plan" will be any more successful than previously-announced plans. And the splitting of the capital into sectarian divisions is in part the fault of the U.S.-trained and -supported army, with parts of western Baghdad being patrolled by army units dominated by Sunnis while eastern Baghdad is being patrolled by Shiite-dominated units.

"Our past efforts to secure Baghdad failed for two principal reasons: There were not enough Iraqi and American troops to secure neighborhoods that had been cleared of terrorists and insurgents. And there were too many restrictions on the troops we did have. Our military commanders reviewed the new Iraqi plan to ensure that it addressed these mistakes. They report that it does. They also report that this plan can work."

The most important reason for the U.S. failure to secure Baghdad is that the majority of Baghdad residents see the United States as a foreign occupation army and the Iraqi government as a puppet regime of the occupying

power. The presence of additional foreign troops patrolling Baghdad neighborhoods is likely to intensify the resistance rather than mollify it. An additional 18,000 troops in a city of five million will do little to secure neighborhoods where the majority of the population sees such forces as an illegitimate foreign occupation force. And lessening “restrictions” on the operations of U.S. forces is not likely to somehow endear them to the population whom already views attacks on the U.S. forces as legitimate.

This is a strong commitment. But for it to succeed, our commanders say the Iraqis will need our help. So America will change our strategy to help the Iraqis carry out their campaign to put down sectarian violence—and bring security to the people of Baghdad. This will require increasing American force levels. So I have committed more than 20,000 additional American troops to Iraq.

This minor tactical shift cannot be reasonably called a “change of strategy.” And President Bush will not be able to commit additional troops to Baghdad if Congress refuses to provide the money for the additional deployment.

“Many listening tonight will ask why this effort will succeed when previous operations to secure Baghdad did not. Here are the differences: In earlier operations, Iraqi and American forces cleared many neighborhoods of terrorists and insurgents—but when our forces moved on to other targets, the killers returned. This time, we will have the force levels we need to hold the areas that have been cleared. In earlier operations, political and sectarian interference prevented Iraqi and American forces from going into neighborhoods that are home to those fueling the sectarian violence. This time, Iraqi and American forces will have a green light to enter these neighborhoods—and Prime Minister Maliki has pledged that political or sectarian interference will not be tolerated.”

Even if Maliki agrees in principle, there are serious questions whether U.S. forces will be provided this kind of cooperation. For example, high-ranking American officers have reported that radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr’s Al-Mahdi Army maintains a strong presence in the regular police force, including up to 90% of the 35,000 officers currently working in northeastern part of Baghdad. In addition, the Iranian-trained Badr Brigade dominates police commando units. Local police—primarily outside of Baghdad, but within the sprawling city as well—maintain a high degree of autonomy from the central government.

“This new strategy will not yield an immediate end to suicide bombings, assassinations, or IED attacks. Our enemies in Iraq will make every effort to ensure that our television screens are filled with images of death and suffering.”

This line appears to be an assertion that the violence is primarily designed to affect U.S. support for the war, thereby implying that Americans who recognize that things are getting worse instead of better are dupes of enemy propaganda. In reality, the primary targets of these attacks are their victims, not American public opinion.

“Yet over time, we can expect to see Iraqi troops chasing down murderers, fewer brazen acts of terror, and growing trust and cooperation from Baghdad’s residents. When this happens, daily life will improve, Iraqis will gain confidence in their leaders, and the government will have the breathing space it needs to make progress in other critical areas. Most of Iraq’s Sunni and Shia want to live together in peace—and reducing the violence in Baghdad will help make reconciliation possible.”

Unfortunately, Iraq government forces are responsible for murder and terrorism themselves and have therefore lost the trust and cooperation of many of Baghdad’s residents and alienated themselves from the population. U.S. forces—as is inevitable in urban counter-insurgency warfare situations—have also been responsible for thousands of civilian deaths and have often turned a blind eye to government-sponsored death squad activity. Indeed, it is the failure of U.S. forces and the forces of the U.S.-backed Iraqi government in Baghdad to provide

the Iraqi people with basic security that has led many ordinary citizens, who would otherwise not identify with sectarian politics, to turn to extremist sectarian groups for protection.

“A successful strategy for Iraq goes beyond military operations. Ordinary Iraqi citizens must see that military operations are accompanied by visible improvements in their neighborhoods and communities. So America will hold the Iraqi government to the benchmarks it has announced.”

How the Iraqi government will be held to benchmarks is unclear. And how additional troops will make a difference in this regard is similarly dubious.

“To establish its authority, the Iraqi government plans to take responsibility for security in all of Iraq’s provinces by November. To give every Iraqi citizen a stake in the country’s economy, Iraq will pass legislation to share oil revenues among all Iraqis. To show that it is committed to delivering a better life, the Iraqi government will spend \$10 billion dollars of its own money on reconstruction and infrastructure projects that will create new jobs.”

These are all reasonable initiatives, but there are serious questions as to whether the Iraqi government can follow through. Conversely, it inevitably raises questions about a government’s independence when the president of the United States can confidently announce that its parliament will pass certain legislation and spend a specific amount of money. Furthermore, the Iraqi government’s budget is just over \$20 billion. It clearly does not have the capacity to increase reconstruction efforts in the magnitude the President suggests.

“To empower local leaders, Iraqis plan to hold provincial elections later this year.”

While some democratically elected local and provincial governments have been relatively responsible, others have become the personal fiefdoms of radical clerics and war lords, who have done much to disempower the population.

“And to allow more Iraqis to re-enter their nation’s political life, the government will reform de-Baathification laws—and establish a fair process for considering amendments to Iraq’s constitution.”

It was the U.S. government that initially imposed the overly broad de-Baathification laws, decimating the experienced government bureaucracy that had long been a bastion of secularism in the country. Assuming the United States has the power to change Iraqi laws, reversing some of these laws at this point may be too little too late, however. The Iraqi government has packed government ministries with patronage posts based on sectarian, tribal, or political party affiliation. The ministries are rife with corruption and are unlikely to re-open themselves to qualified and experienced government workers from the previous regime. In addition, hundreds of thousands of former government workers and other educated Iraqis have since left the country to flee the violence and have set up new lives elsewhere. Regarding constitutional reform, there is little hope at this point that the flawed U.S.-organized constitutional process can overcome its current deadlock.

“America will change our approach to help the Iraqi government as it works to meet these benchmarks. In keeping with the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, we will increase the embedding of American advisers in Iraqi Army units—and partner a Coalition brigade with every Iraqi Army division. We will help the Iraqis build a larger and better-equipped Army—and we will accelerate the training of Iraqi forces, which remains the essential U.S. security mission in Iraq.”

The U.S. spent much of 2006 training Iraqi troops, having trained an additional 100,000 forces, yet there was an increase in violence. And while there has been training of troops, there has been a severe lack of equipment provided to the Iraqi forces. Bush does not acknowledge the root of the problem with the Iraqi forces—their

sectarian allegiances. Without allegiance to Iraqi government, there is little evidence that these forces can be effective.

“We will give our commanders and civilians greater flexibility to spend funds for economic assistance. We will double the number of Provincial Reconstruction Teams. These teams bring together military and civilian experts to help local Iraqi communities pursue reconciliation, strengthen moderates, and speed the transition to Iraqi self-reliance. And Secretary Rice will soon appoint a reconstruction coordinator in Baghdad to ensure better results for economic assistance being spent in Iraq”

Having spent more than \$20 billion on reconstruction projects, the United States has little to show for its efforts. Levels of electricity, water, sewage, and unemployment have remained virtually unchanged over the past three years. Oversight of projects has been sorely needed and should help prevent the problems of waste, fraud, and abuse but it will not change the concept and design of these programs which have been unsuccessful in reconstructing Iraq.

“As we make these changes, we will continue to pursue al-Qaida and foreign fighters. Al-Qaida is still active in Iraq. Its home base is Anbar Province. Al-Qaida has helped make Anbar the most violent area of Iraq outside the capital. A captured al-Qaida document describes the terrorists’ plan to infiltrate and seize control of the province. This would bring al-Qaida closer to its goals of taking down Iraq’s democracy, building a radical Islamic empire, and launching new attacks on the United States at home and abroad.”

While al-Qaida is stronger in Anbar than other provinces, it still constitutes only a tiny minority of the insurgency there. Most of the insurgency in Anbar consists of homegrown Sunni Islamists, tribal groups, Baathists, and other nationalists. The U.S. military estimates that foreign fighters represent barely 5% of the insurgency. The overwhelming majority of those fighting in Anbar have no desire to build a radical Islamic empire or attack the United States. They want to rid their country of foreign occupation forces and oust a government they see as repressive, corrupt, and too closely aligned with their Persian and American enemies. The majority of insurgents unaffiliated with al-Qaida would likely put down their arms and join a broad coalition government in return for amnesty and a timetable for a U.S. withdrawal, options the Bush administration has rejected.

“Our military forces in Anbar are killing and capturing al-Qaida leaders—and protecting the local population. Recently, local tribal leaders have begun to show their willingness to take on al-Qaida. As a result, our commanders believe we have an opportunity to deal a serious blow to the terrorists. So I have given orders to increase American forces in Anbar Province by 4,000 troops.”

The tactics and ideology of al-Qaida has indeed alienated large numbers of Iraqis, but that does not mean that it would support the presence of American forces in Anbar or end its attacks against them, particularly if the number of U.S. troops increases.

“These troops will work with Iraqi and tribal forces to step up the pressure on the terrorists. America’s men and women in uniform took away al-Qaida’s safe haven in Afghanistan—and we will not allow them to re-establish it in Iraq.”

By sending American troops to Iraq, the Bush administration has already allowed al-Qaida not only to establish a base in Iraq, but to greatly expand its forces and sympathizers throughout the Islamic world. By sending even more troops into Iraq, al-Qaida will likely grow even stronger.

“Succeeding in Iraq also requires defending its territorial integrity—and stabilizing the region in the face of the extremist challenge. This begins with addressing Iran and Syria. These two regimes are allowing terrorists and

insurgents to use their territory to move in and out of Iraq. Iran is providing material support for attacks on American troops. We will disrupt the attacks on our forces. We will interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria. And we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq.”

The idea that the Shiite government of Iran is providing material support for the insurgency against U.S. forces is ludicrous. It is apparently yet another of a series of false allegations leveled by the administration against Iran as part of an effort to justify possible future military action against that country. What Iran has done, however, is to actively support Shiite militias within the Iraqi government. For example, Iraqi Interior Minister Bayan Jabr was trained by Iran’s infamous Revolutionary Guards and later served as a leader of the Badr Brigade, the militia of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq . Americans have also trained Interior Ministry police and commandoes and has effectively allied with Iran in supporting Shiite extremists in an effort to suppress Sunni insurgents. In other words, Iran is not backing the insurgency fighting U.S. forces but is backing elements of the same government supported by the United States .

Claims of active Syrian support for the insurgents are also grossly exaggerated. The ruling Baath party of Syria long opposed what have become the two main elements of the insurgency: Saddam’s Iraqi wing of the Baath party and the radical Sunni Islamist groups (which have also challenged the regime in Damascus). While foreign fighters supporting the insurgency have slipped through the long poorly demarcated desert border between the two countries, the Bush administration has not presented any convincing evidence that the Syrian government is actively encouraging or facilitating such activity. By promising to “seek out and destroy” those allegedly supporting the insurgency, President Bush may be preparing a pretext to expand the war into neighboring countries, as previous presidents expanded the Vietnam War to Laos and Cambodia.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration has rejected the Baker Commission’s key recommendation to engage diplomatically with Syria and Iran in order to help stabilize the region.

“We are also taking other steps to bolster the security of Iraq and protect American interests in the Middle East. I recently ordered the deployment of an additional carrier strike group to the region. We will expand intelligence sharing—and deploy Patriot air defense systems to reassure our friends and allies.”

It is unclear how sailing an additional aircraft carrier strike group into the Persian Gulf will contribute to stabilizing the violent chaos in Iraq’s cities. Instead, this could be part of preparations for U.S. military strikes on Iran . Similarly, given that the Iraqi insurgency does not have any intermediate or long-range missile capability, the deployment of Patriot air defense systems doesn’t seem to make sense either. This may be part of a preparation to defend against Syrian or Iranian counter-attacks in the event of U.S. strikes on those countries. Or it might simply be another boondoggle for U.S. arms merchants. The most the United States could do to reassure its allies in the region is to stop engaging in provocative military operations that result in an extremist backlash.

“We will work with the governments of Turkey and Iraq to help them resolve problems along their border.”

This will be tricky, to say the least. Thanks largely to a series of U.S. policies the Baghdad government essentially has no control over its border with Turkey or anywhere in the Kurdish-dominated northern part of its country. The quasi-independent status of Iraqi Kurdistan has emboldened ethnic Kurds in southeastern Turkey to renew their struggle for autonomy and independence and has emboldened the Turkish government to renew its counter-insurgency efforts and political repression, including incursions into Iraqi territory. Meanwhile, the ethnic Turk minority in northern Iraq is feeling increasing persecution as well from U.S.-backed Kurdish

militias. If U.S. diplomacy continues to be as inept as it has been elsewhere in the region, the Iraqi-Turkish border region could deteriorate into full-scale war.

“And we will work with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating the region.”

It is the United States, which already deploys nuclear weapons on its planes and ships, that currently dominates the region and will continue to do so whether the Iranians or anyone else likes it or not. If indeed, Iran does harbor nuclear weapons ambitions, such weapons are presumably designed to deter possible American and Israeli attacks. Iran witnessed U.S. forces invade its immediate neighbors to the east and west: Afghanistan and Iraq. With repeated threats by the U.S. government to attack Iran as well, it is not unreasonable to appreciate why that country might desire a nuclear deterrent. Finally, despite pledges to “work with others,” the Bush administration has certainly not abandoned its willingness to challenge Iran unilaterally.

“We will use America’s full diplomatic resources to rally support for Iraq from nations throughout the Middle East. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf States need to understand that an American defeat in Iraq would create a new sanctuary for extremists—and a strategic threat to their survival. These nations have a stake in a successful Iraq that is at peace with its neighbors—and they must step up their support for Iraq’s unity government.”

If the U.S. purpose is really to promote democracy in Iraq, why is President Bush pushing for greater influence by these dictatorships, including the Islamic fundamentalist regime of Saudi Arabia? And, are they really likely to even want to support an Iraqi government with such strong ideological ties with Iran or to support a continued U.S. military presence in the Middle East that is provoking extremist elements within their own countries?

“And on Friday, Secretary Rice will leave for the region—to build support for Iraq, and continue the urgent diplomacy required to help bring peace to the Middle East.”

Given her track record up until this point, Rice will not likely do any better this time. The United States is not seen as an honest broker in the Middle East anymore. The Iraq Study Group’s suggestion of bringing the regional players together would have a much greater chance of success.

“The challenge playing out across the broader Middle East is more than a military conflict. It is the decisive ideological struggle of our time. On one side are those who believe in freedom and moderation. On the other side are extremists who kill the innocent, and have declared their intention to destroy our way of life. In the long run, the most realistic way to protect the American people is to provide a hopeful alternative to the hateful ideology of the enemy—by advancing liberty across a troubled region. It is in the interests of the United States to stand with the brave men and women who are risking their lives to claim their freedom—and help them as they work to raise up just and hopeful societies across the Middle East.”

This obscene over-simplification ignores the fact that, as extremist as many opponents of the United States and its allies in the region may indeed be, the United States and most of its allies have hardly been paragons of freedom and moderation. The United States is the world’s number one military, diplomatic, and economic supporter of dictatorial regimes in the Middle East that continue to deny their peoples basic freedom. The United States also backs the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara, which deny those peoples their freedoms in flagrant violation of international law and a series of UN Security Council resolutions. Rather than provide a hopeful alternative, the United States has brought war, devastation, and chaos to Iraq and other countries in the region.

“From Afghanistan to Lebanon to the Palestinian Territories, millions of ordinary people are sick of the violence, and want a future of peace and opportunity for their children. And they are looking at Iraq. They want to know: Will America withdraw and yield the future of that country to the extremists—or will we stand with the Iraqis who have made the choice for freedom?”

Through the large-scale U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, support for Israel’s massive assaults on Lebanon, and support for Israel’s ongoing occupation and repression in the Palestinian Territories, it is the United States that is largely responsible for the violence inflicted upon these nations. Poll after poll has indicated that the vast majority of the peoples of this region want the United States to get out of Iraq as soon as possible. Leaving Iraq does not mean yielding that country to extremists, nor does staying in Iraq back the cause of freedom.

“The changes I have outlined tonight are aimed at ensuring the survival of a young democracy that is fighting for its life in a part of the world of enormous importance to American security.”

It should be pretty obvious at this point, given the ongoing U.S. support for dictatorial regimes in neighboring countries, that the Bush administration does not particularly care about promoting democracy in the region. Indeed, the United States initially opposed free elections in Iraq after U.S. forces took over that country. As long as the government remains so dependent on the United States, it will never gain the credibility among the Iraqi people it needs for its survival.

“Let me be clear: The terrorists and insurgents in Iraq are without conscience, and they will make the year ahead bloody and violent. Even if our new strategy works exactly as planned, deadly acts of violence will continue—and we must expect more Iraqi and American casualties. The question is whether our new strategy will bring us closer to success. I believe that it will.”

Sending additional troops will just make the coming year even bloodier and more violent, and will make success, by almost any definition, even more elusive. This strategy will only embolden the extremist elements even more as reaction to the expanded U.S. occupation draws more and more angry young men into their ranks. Much like the initial invasion of Iraq, increasing troops will result in strengthening Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida.

“Victory will not look like the ones our fathers and grandfathers achieved. There will be no surrender ceremony on the deck of a battleship. But victory in Iraq will bring something new in the Arab world—a functioning democracy that polices its territory, upholds the rule of law, respects fundamental human liberties, and answers to its people. A democratic Iraq will not be perfect. But it will be a country that fights terrorists instead of harboring them—and it will help bring a future of peace and security for our children and grandchildren.”

Most Iraqis and most Arabs indeed would like to see stable, accountable democratic governance that respects human rights and the rules of law. Of the scores of new democracies that have emerged throughout the world over the past three decades, however, the vast majority moved away from dictatorship and repression as a result of sustained nonviolent struggle by indigenous democratic civil society organizations. No new democracy has emerged as a result of a foreign invasion and occupation. It is hard to imagine how President Bush’s proposals can improve the situation in Iraq even marginally. Twenty-five years ago, in justifying his Vietnam policy, President Richard Nixon promised that continued prosecution of the war would bring “a generation of peace.” President Bush’s similar claim is just as disingenuous. It is no less than a rationalization for a failed imperial policy that has destroyed a nation that was no threat to us, drained our national treasury, damaged our international prestige, and sent thousands of our finest young men and women home in body bags and with permanently debilitating injuries.