

The military in Iraq is resolving nothing

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When well-qualified retired officers speak out against their political masters' policies, the public should take heed. Gen. Sir Mike Jackson, the recently retired UK Army chief, is now speaking out, and his concerns warrant full consideration. I've known Mike well over the years — and while we haven't agreed on everything, he is on solid ground in his criticisms of US and Coalition policy in Iraq, at least as they are reflected in what I have seen of his book, *Soldier: The Autobiography*.

As US secretary of defense, Don Rumsfeld exerted a heavy hand on American foreign policy. I had first got to know him working around the White House in the Ford administration. He was the brilliant 42-year-old who would certainly be president some day: tough-minded then, even tougher 28 years later. Strike quickly, and then leave. Invading Iraq would serve two agendas: first, to finish off Saddam, the bete noir of the Republican right; second, to cement his military "transformation" plan. But, ultimately, this is George Bush's war.

Mind you, Mike Jackson isn't the first retired general to criticize Bush, Rumsfeld and their policies. I began, in early 2002, questioning the necessity for war, and the haste with which the Bush administration was pushing the US into the invasion of Iraq. By early autumn of 2002, I was warning against giving the president a blank check to take the US to war before all other alternatives were exhausted. Secretary Rumsfeld's aversion to "nation-building," NATO activities in the Balkans, and peacekeeping in general, were well known. He and his team were preventing adequate postinvasion planning. I urged in testimony to the US Senate that full postwar planning be developed before the invasion — just as Mike and I had done as part of NATO before the 1999 operation against Serbia. And I warned that US actions in the region would serve to supercharge Al-Qaeda recruiting. The retired US marine, Gen. Joe Hoare, supported me then, and warned of civil war in Iraq following the invasion.

The poor results of the operation have largely substantiated the warnings from myself and others, despite the valiant efforts of our soldiers and military leaders. To be sure, the US and British forces have had long-standing differences in how to conduct peace operations, with the Americans more concerned with force protection and coercion, and the British — reflecting the experiences in Northern Ireland, as well as British defense parsimony — always willing to take slightly greater risks, to lower the emphasis on force protection, and to work the populace with persuasion and charm. But these differences have been marginal in affecting the outcomes in Iraq.

In Iraq today, civil war is under way. The cities and countryside are being carved up into sectarian, tribal, or militia-dominated fiefdoms, aided and abetted by Iranian support, while in the south, British forces have tried to maintain the veneer of control while training local authorities. Iran obviously has mounted an intense effort spanning the political, economic, and military areas, to gain influence and prepare for dominance following the US and UK departures. In the central and northern regions, the US has expended much of four years finishing Iran's agenda by fighting against Sunni insurgents, including Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and has only lately begun to focus episodically on the Shiite militia supported by Iran. Rumor in the region says the recent US-Sunni alliances in Al-Anbar Province, of which President Bush made a great deal on his recent visit, are more the result of financial emoluments of outside

Sunni powers than US activities, and are in preparation not for support of the central government, but rather for blocking Iranian-Shiite consolidation when the Americans depart.

The burden faced by Mike and the rest is to get it right from here on, to work out what needs to be done strategically, and what contribution the troops can make to this end. The Petraeus report, submitted this week, will mark another stab at the effort. It is already clear that the “surge” hasn’t brought the impact that its advocates had hoped for. Political reconciliation is as elusive as ever. But at the tactical level, the more intensive application of forces has brought rewards in intelligence collection and operational effectiveness. This, at least, has kept the US in the game, while Iran works its three-pronged strategy of nuclear ambition, gripping Israel through Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria, and dominating Iraq.

But the surge cannot be the lasting answer — it has just bought time for all sides: for President Bush, who doesn’t want to confront the imminence of strategic failure; for the Iranians, who aren’t ready to go for broke on their nuclear and regional ambitions; and for the Iraqi factions, struggling among themselves for survival and dominance. And time for the UK and other allies to struggle with US policy and political processes — trying to be supportive and, at the same time, make the right decisions for their troops and their publics. No one can say for certain that the Iraqis will not resolve their political differences in the midst of all this, but it is certainly unlikely.

In the US, the dialogue has been all about troops and tactics. At the end of his book, Mike Jackson joins this debate, expressing concern about the need to avoid a fixed timeline. Mike isn’t wrong, but it’s a pity the debate is being fought out on these points, because the solution doesn’t lie at this level. While Republicans may claim some victory from the limited and fragile military gains, and the Democrats are unwilling to push for an early and complete pullout, the real solution likely lies elsewhere.

Unless and until the US and its allies deal effectively with Iran and its ambitions, there is likely to be no stability, no end to conflict in Iraq and no solution. Keeping troops in Iraq preserves options — that is all. The isolating of Iran and occasional saber rattling is not an adequate response. Nor is the febrile, repeated efforts at diplomatic sanctions.

Instead, the US will have to take the lead, with its allies in support. An effective strategic response must begin with an intensified dialogue within the region, and real, sustained and in-depth conversations with the Iranian leadership at multiple levels. Regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan must be included, not just informed. Principles must be developed, and consequences made plain, both positive and negative. The way ahead will be tortuous. There will be threats and counterthreats, blandishments and promises, crises and imminent conflict. Economic pressures will intensify.

But this is the path to be followed if we want to try to avoid conflict with Iran and at the same time head off its nuclear capability. The time remaining is short. There are alternatives to war, far better alternatives. But if all we can discuss is troop strength in Iraq, we won’t find them.