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Defensive Shift

Now that President Bush has reconsidered his go-it-alone policy in Iraq, he would do well to take a fresh look at the goal of the troubled occupation.

His efforts to seek broader international support for nation building and peacekeeping are still in an early stage, but they represent a welcome policy shift. Significantly, Mr. Bush, in last week's address to the nation, reached out to the countries that had opposed the invasion of Iraq, saying that "we cannot let past differences interfere with present duties."

The surprisingly swift and successful invasion was quite properly in the hands of the Defense Department. Security remains a major challenge, and the same department certainly must have a continuing role. Still, the task ahead, restoring Iraq's infrastructure, helping organize a new Iraqi government, and enlisting international help from often-reluctant other nations, is more properly a job for the State Department.

There may be little point in recalling at this late date that a group of neo-conservatives now holding key spots in the Pentagon got us into this situation were it not that they, headed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, and Undersecretary for Policy Douglas Feith, are still running the show. They rely heavily on the advice of long-time Iraqi exiles, especially Ahmed Chalabi, who had assured us that most Iraqis would welcome a U.S. invasion and had produced a stream of intelligence, not yet confirmed, that Saddam was close to production of nuclear weapons.

More fundamentally, the group has promoted the idea that a liberated Iraq could quickly be transformed into a democratic, peaceful, capitalistic nation, friendly to the United States and willing to coexist with Israel. This new Iraq would be a catalyst for spreading peace, prosperity and representative government through the entire Middle East.

This dream is the subject of a privately circulated 26-page paper by Stanley J. Heginbotham, a former foreign affairs chief at the Congressional Research Service at the Library of Congress. He calls the Pentagon plan "the transformation project for Iraq," and says it is unacceptable to the people of Iraq, enormously expensive and almost impossible to achieve without a continuing American military occupation of the country.

In its place, Mr. Heginbotham would substitute what he calls "the restorative project for Iraq." He writes: "There is no question but that we have an obligation to the people of Iraq. We have set in motion a train of events that have materially worsened the life conditions of many of them, and we need to take responsibility for seeing that the state of the country is at least restored to something marginally better than it was before we invaded the country."

He argues that as long as the Office of the Secretary of Defense remains in control of Iraq and pursues its transformation project, U.S. efforts will be widely seen as an illegitimate colonial occupation and will face classic anti-colonial guerrilla warfare. He warns that the United Nations agencies, countries like Jordan, and any Iraqis who join with the occupation force will be viewed as parts of an illegitimate enterprise and be subject to guerrilla violence.

Mr. Heginbotham argues that only Congress, with its power of the purse, can wrest the occupation from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and "turn it over to an entity - probably the Department of State - that is prepared to pursue a much more modest restorative project and to share the decision making in support of that project with U.N. agencies and/or a multilateral mandated power."

Is this too bleak an analysis? Maybe, if the rosy estimates of progress by Mr. Bush and Mr. Rumsfeld prove accurate. But if guerrilla warfare continues, American casualties keep mounting and the cost of the enterprise keep climbing, some such drastic change of course may provide the best way out.