

Growing anxiety in US ruling circles over Iraq debacle

New York Times calls for postponing January 30 election

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Voicing the growing concern within the US ruling elite that the Bush administration's policies in Iraq are leading to disaster, the *New York Times* published a lengthy editorial Wednesday calling for the postponement of the January 30 elections in order to prevent the political collapse of the occupied country.

Headlined "Facing Facts About Iraq's Election," the editorial argued that holding an election under the present conditions, with the Sunni minority in the north and west of the country effectively excluded from the balloting, would be a recipe for "a civil war between Sunni and Shiite Muslims that would create instability throughout the Middle East and give terrorists a new, ungoverned region that they could use as a base of operations."

The newspaper, which supported the Bush administration's decision to invade and occupy Iraq, while criticizing its handling of the occupation, argued that postponing the elections by two or three months should not be viewed as a surrender to the Iraqi insurgents—which both the Bush administration and the *Times* describe as "terrorists"—if it succeeds in bringing a section of the Muslim clergy and the tribal elders of the Sunni-populated region into a new US-backed Iraqi government.

The *Times* noted that many officials of the interim regime in Baghdad have "shown some interest in putting off the voting if there is a chance of winning more Sunni participation, and others are said to be leaning that way in private." The principal obstacle, the editorial complained, was Bush himself, and his inflexibility about the January 30 deadline, even as the security situation in the Sunni Triangle deteriorates.

This editorial is only the most prominent in what has become a groundswell of commentaries and warnings from within the American political and media establishment about the danger that the US occupation regime in Iraq could disintegrate into uncontrollable violence in a matter of weeks.

Last Thursday, at a luncheon sponsored by the New America Foundation, which is aligned with the right wing of the Democratic Party, two former national security advisers, Republican Brent Scowcroft and Democrat Zbigniew Brzezinski, made dire warnings about the prospects for Iraq and the overall recklessness of the Bush administration's foreign policy.

Scowcroft told his audience of prominent journalists and foreign policy experts, drawn from various Washington think tanks, that the Bush administration's unilateralism and arrogance were

alienating former allies in Europe and the Middle East. US foreign policy was failing to address the implications of the globalization of the world economy, he said, which made it impossible for a single power, even one like the United States with unchallenged military superiority, to simply dictate to the world.

Iraq was the focal point of conflict, he said, adding, "With Iraq, we clearly have a tiger by the tail. And the elections are turning out to be less about a promising transformation, and it has great potential for deepening the conflict. Indeed we may be seeing an incipient civil war at the present time."

Given Scowcroft's close friendship with the elder Bush (he co-wrote his presidential foreign policy memoir), this warning of the danger of civil war was extraordinary. The former national security adviser for both Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush opposed the decision to go to war with Iraq on tactical grounds. He has become increasingly vocal about the danger that the US failure in Iraq is undermining the worldwide role of US imperialism. Last month he was removed from his unpaid government position, as chairman of the president's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, when Bush declined to reappoint him for his second term.

Brzezinski, a Democrat and former national security adviser to Jimmy Carter, gave a far more strident warning about the potential consequences of the Iraq adventure. A hard-line hawk during the Cold War, the Polish-born Brzezinski is the author of a recent volume on global strategy, *The Grand Chessboard*, which advocated the American seizure of a dominant position on the Eurasian land-mass in order to prevent the rise of any potential rival. While this might appear to dovetail with the Bush doctrine of preventive war and the conquest of Afghanistan and Iraq, Brzezinski has emerged as one of the most trenchant establishment critics of Bush foreign policy, arguing from the standpoint of US imperialism's longer-term interests.

Citing the description of the Iraq war by Rumsfeld as a "war of choice," Brzezinski said it is "already a serious moral setback to the United States: a moral setback both in how we start, how it was justified, and because of some of the egregious incidents that have accompanied this proceeding.... The United States has never been involved in an intervention in its entire history like it is today. It is also a military setback."

He emphasized the escalating costs of the war: "While our ultimate objectives are very ambitious, we will never achieve

democracy and stability without being willing to commit 500,000 troops, spend \$200 billion a year, probably have a draft, and have some form of war compensation. As a society, we are not prepared to do that.”

“The Soviet Union could have won the war in Afghanistan too had it been prepared to do its equivalent of what I just mentioned,” Brzezinski continued. “But even the Soviet Union was not prepared to do that because there comes a point in the life of a nation when such sacrifices are not justified ... and only time will tell if the United States is facing a moment of wisdom, or is resigned to cultural decay.”

The Bush administration now faces potentially crippling challenges in recovering both international legitimacy and domestic unity, he said, and the government had little credibility either at home or abroad: “Today no one will believe us if we declare that we are convinced Iran is actually pursuing nuclear weapons without any overriding evidence to sustain our position.”

He cited public opinion polls showing overwhelming hostility to US policies around the world, pointing to one in particular, in which respondents expressed disappointment that Iraq had not provided more effective resistance to the US invasion. “What was that question’s meaning?” he asked. “What was the question that was posed? The question that really was posed [is] ‘aren’t you sorry that more Americans were not killed?’ That is some measure of the depth of the animus to our policies.”

The Bush administration’s strategy in fighting terrorism was a failure, Brzezinski said: “The global war on terrorism lumps all terrorists together, lumps all Islamic terrorists together and pits them as enemies against us. Strategy is not about uniting your enemies and dividing your friends. It’s the opposite.”

The significance of these criticisms can be demonstrated by the audience assembled to hear them, including leading journalists like David Sanger of the *New York Times*, Ron Brownstein of the *Los Angeles Times*, Howard Fineman of *Newsweek*, James Fallows of *Atlantic Monthly*, Dana Priest of the *Washington Post* and Judy Woodruff of CNN, as well as representatives of *Businessweek*, UPI, Knight-Ridder, *US News & World Report* and other publications.

Within days, Sanger was in print with a commentary in the *Times* headlined, “Hot Topic: How the US Might Disengage in Iraq.” He cited widespread discussion in Washington, among Republican and Democratic congressmen, the military brass, and even Bush administration officials over using the January 30 election as an occasion for beginning to draw down US troop strength in Iraq.

Sanger cited both Scowcroft’s criticism of Bush on January 6, and Bush’s reply, in which he rejected the concerns about the election leading to civil war and declared, “I think elections will be such an incredibly hopeful experience for the Iraqi people.” The *Times* writer continued: “But the president’s optimism is in sharp contrast, some administration insiders say, to some conversations in the White House Situation Room, the Pentagon and Congress. For the first time, there are questions about whether it is politically possible to wait until the Iraqi forces are adequately trained before pressure to start bringing back American troops becomes overwhelming.”

These commentaries in no way signify that the Bush administration is about to begin troop withdrawals from Iraq. On the contrary, the onslaught of insurgent attacks in the days before and after the January 30 vote could well compel the Pentagon to dispatch more troops to shore up the crumbling US position.

Rather, these discussions reveal the deep divisions within the ruling elite—largely papered over during the election campaign in order to avoid giving the American people any say in the matter—over how best to deal with the debacle in Iraq.

While Brzezinski, Scowcroft, the *New York Times* and others counsel cutting one’s losses, such a course would constitute a public admission by Bush that his foreign policy had failed, and would lead, sooner rather than later, to the effective collapse of his administration.

The Bush White House will hardly acquiesce in this fate. It is bent on a further reckless throw of the dice, either increasing US troop strength in Iraq, using even more devastating and violent methods, or provoking a new conflict with another potential antagonist, such as Syria or Iran.

The all-out pro-war faction in the media has rushed to bolster the administration. *Washington Post* foreign policy columnist David Ignatius warned of the “growing discussion, among impatient Republicans on Capitol Hill and senior military officers, about whether America needs to look for a quicker exit strategy from a war that is going badly.”

The *Post* editorial page, among the most fervent supporters of the war in the media establishment, published a statement demanding that the Iraq elections take place as scheduled January 30.

The implications of the all-out war position were spelled out in Ignatius’s column, which calls for removing all restraints on US military action in the Sunni-populated regions where insurgent activity is most widespread. “Insurgents must wake up each morning afraid that they will die,” he wrote. “This sort of dirty war isn’t one I would like to see American forces fighting; it’s one for Iraqi special forces. It will be a brutal fight, but it’s the same one authorities in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Syria must fight every day against jihadists there. Somehow, the psychology of intimidation in Iraq has to be reversed, so that it’s the insurgents who fear for their lives.”

Thus goes the logic of Bush’s war. The initial pretext, long discredited and forgotten, was Saddam Hussein’s alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction and ties to Al Qaeda (which has been immeasurably strengthened by the US conquest of Iraq). Then the public was told that Washington was bringing democracy and freedom to Iraq. But, as Ignatius spells out, the US occupation requires the same brutal methods as those employed by the military dictatorships and absolute monarchies which serve as Washington’s allies in the rest of the Arab world.



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