

Year-end press conference

Bush sets stage for major escalation in Iraq

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The remarks delivered by President Bush at a year-end press conference Wednesday, combined with a series of military and political developments, point inexorably to a major escalation of the US war in Iraq in the coming year.

Bush revealed little new in his encounter with the press corps, dismissing as “hypothetical” all questions on the reported turn by his administration to a new military offensive in Iraq based on a “surge” of up to 40,000 more US combat troops in the country.

The president claimed he was still weighing various recommendations from military, diplomatic and Iraqi sources—as well as those of the much-trumpeted but already marginalized Iraq Study Group—before presenting a new policy in a speech that is expected sometime in early January.

His newly installed defense secretary, Robert Gates, spent his third day on the job Wednesday in Baghdad meeting with US generals. Afterwards, he told reporters, “We discussed the obvious things. We discussed the possibility of a surge and the potential for what it might accomplish.”

Bush made it clear that his administration has no intention of bowing to the will of the American people, expressed at the polls six weeks ago in a massive repudiation of the Iraq war and a resounding defeat for the Republican Party.

“I’m not going to speculate out loud about what I’m going to tell the nation when I’m prepared to do so about the way forward,” said Bush. “I will tell you we’re looking at all options. And one of those options, of course, is increasing more troops. But, in order to do so, there must be a specific mission that can be accomplished with more troops.”

Recent polls have indicated overwhelming opposition to an increased military presence in Iraq. According to a CNN poll released this week, the option of sending more troops is backed by barely 11 percent of the public, with 67 percent expressing opposition to the war and 54 percent calling for a withdrawal of all US forces from the country either immediately or within the next year.

Bush was asked specifically, given such polls numbers, “Are you still willing to follow a path that seems to be in opposition to the will of the American people?”

The president responded in the affirmative. “I am willing to follow a path that leads to victory,” he said. “And that’s exactly why we’re conducting the review we are.” He rejected a policy of “retreat,” declaring that it would “embolden radicals” and “hurt the credibility of the United States.”

One of the most revealing exchanges in the press conference came when Bush was asked, “If you conclude that a surge in troop levels in Iraq is needed, would you overrule your military commanders if they felt it was not a good idea?”

He responded by describing the reporter’s query as “a dangerous hypothetical question.” The danger, as far as he was concerned, was political. Ever since the war began, Bush has repeated the litany that he bases his decisions on troop levels on the advice of the generals in Iraq, rather than “the politicians in Washington.”

He has wrapped himself in the mantle of “commander-in-chief” in order to flout the constitutional sense of the term, which affirms civilian control over the military, and impugn any criticism of his policy as tantamount to treason.

Now, it is public knowledge that the proposal to “surge” tens of thousands of additional combat troops into strife-torn Baghdad and Anbar province is opposed by substantial layers of the military’s uniformed command. Senior generals, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have let it be known that they see the increased deployment as a reckless and desperate measure likely to provoke even greater Iraqi resistance and expose more American soldiers to deadly attacks.

NBC News Wednesday night quoted one unnamed senior commander who described the deployment of additional troops as akin to “throwing kerosene on a fire.”

Commanders have also expressed concern that the method proposed to achieve the increased troop levels—redeploying some units to Iraq early, while delaying the scheduled departure of others—will further weaken the military over the long term, while dealing another blow to already plummeting morale.

On Tuesday, White House Press Secretary Tony Snow found himself compelled to deny the existence of a “feud between the president and the Joint Chiefs.”

The hostility within the top ranks of the military toward the proposed buildup in Iraq is barely concealed. Gen. James Conway, commandant of the Marine Corps, said Saturday: “We do not believe that just adding numbers for the sake of adding numbers—just thickening the mix—is necessarily the way to go.”

Others whose views closely reflect those of top military commanders spoke more bluntly. Colin Powell, Bush’s former secretary of state and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the administration of the senior Bush, described the military as “about broken” by the Iraq war.

Interviewed on the CBS television program “Face the Nation”

last Sunday, Powell said, “I am not persuaded that another surge of troops into Baghdad for the purposes of suppressing this communitarian violence, this civil war, will work.”

Sounding a similar note was Representative John Murtha, the Pennsylvania Democrat with close ties to the Pentagon’s uniformed chiefs. “Militarily we have lost—there is no question about it, we cannot win this militarily,” he told CNN.

Rejecting the proposal for sending more troops, the congressman added, “They don’t have an achievable mission—a defined mission which they can point to. What’s the point in sending another 40,000 troops?”

The *New York Times* on Wednesday published an article based on interviews with Gen. John Abizaid, senior commander in the Middle East, entitled “General Opposes Adding to US Forces in Iraq, Emphasizing International Solutions for Region.”

The article stated that Abizaid “argues that foreign troops are a toxin bound to be rejected by Iraqis, and that expanding the number of American troops merely puts off the day when Iraqis are forced to take responsibility for their own security.”

The general told the newspaper that he rejected the conception “that somehow or another, if you throw enough military forces at it, that you are going to solve the broader issues in the region . . .”

Significantly, Abizaid is relinquishing his command and retiring from the military by March. Asked by a reporter in Baghdad whether his leaving was strictly a personal decision or bound up with larger policy questions, the general replied that no decision taken by people in positions like his was “totally their own.”

Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the senior commander of American ground troops in Iraq, who advocated the use of “soft power”—employment programs and increased reconstruction funding—to reduce resistance to the US occupation, has been replaced by Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno, who reportedly favors a “surge.”

Odierno, who *Newsweek* reports “is known throughout the Army as a kick-in-the-doors guy,” commanded the 4th Infantry Division in 2003-2004, when the unit earned a fearsome reputation for mass repression and roundups of all military-age Iraqi males in areas known for resistance.

It is clear that the Bush administration is putting in place a set of commanders who support a strategy of deploying overwhelming military force with the aim of breaking the Iraqis’ will to resist US domination.

Military resources are also being positioned for a new offensive. Last week it was reported that a 3,500-member brigade of the 82nd Airborne will be flown to Kuwait immediately after the holidays to provide the first contingent for a surge.

This week it was revealed that the Pentagon is preparing to send a second aircraft carrier battle group into the Persian Gulf, providing not only air power for intensified strikes against Iraqi targets, but also the means for carrying out a future bombing campaign against neighboring Iran.

At his own farewell news conference Tuesday, outgoing United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan described the UN’s failure to halt the US war against Iraq as “the worst moment” in his ten-year tenure at the world body, and warned pointedly that there is “concern that there may be another military operation” against

Iran, which he said would prove “unwise and disastrous.”

One of the central themes of Bush’s press conference was to portray the ongoing debacle in Iraq as only part of a protracted global struggle against “radicals” and “extremists” that would require “difficult choices and additional sacrifices.”

He declared his support for a proposal to increase the US military’s ability to continue the occupation of Iraq as well as fight new wars by beefing up its ranks. “I’m inclined to believe that we need to increase . . . the permanent size of both the United States Army and the United States Marines,” Bush said.

The remark echoed his statement in an interview with the *Washington Post* that the US required more ground forces. “It is an accurate reflection that this ideological war we’re in is going to last for a while, and that we’re going to need a military that’s capable of being able to sustain our efforts and to help us achieve peace,” he said.

While the president declined to discuss concrete numbers for the increased troop levels, some officials have indicated that the aim is to add 70,000 to the ranks of the permanent active-duty military.

Bush’s press conference has once again made clear that the mass opposition to the war in Iraq expressed at the polls on November 7 is being disregarded and repudiated by the administration.

The Democrats, who owe their new majorities in the House and Senate to this broad antiwar sentiment, voiced full support for Bush’s proposal to build up the military. “I am glad he has realized the need for increasing the size of the armed forces . . . but this is where the Democrats have been for two years,” Representative Rahm Emanuel of Illinois, the new House Democratic Caucus chairman, told the *Washington Post*.

Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, who, as the Democrats’ presidential candidate in 2004, called for adding 40,000 more troops to the military’s ranks, also backed Bush’s proposed expansion of the Army and the Marines, calling it a “pragmatic step needed to deal with the warnings of a broken military.”

The incoming Democratic leadership also gave assurances that it will approve the Pentagon’s request, revealed Wednesday, for nearly \$100 billion more to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The request would bring this year’s budget for the two interventions to about \$170 billion—or more than \$3 billion a week.

“Democrats are committed to ensuring our troops have all that they need,” declared a spokesman for incoming Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.

The political establishment as a whole—despite its bitter internal disagreements over policy in Iraq—is unwilling to abandon the attempt to subject the oil-rich country to US domination or renounce the wider strategy of utilizing US military might to pursue the global interests of American capitalism.

Not only is America’s ruling oligarchy unwilling to end the Iraq war, it is preparing a buildup of its armed forces for new and even bloodier interventions.



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