

After five years, mission sorely unaccomplished

Sunday, May 4, 2008

President George W. Bush will never live down "Mission Accomplished." And he should not. When the White House spinners spun that claim five years ago (remember the aircraft carrier?), it seemed cocky and premature. As Bush continues his \$526 billion war-without-end in Iraq, it seems stunningly deceitful.

The only mission that needs to be accomplished is an orderly exit from Iraq, and Bush is no closer to acknowledging that reality. Neither is Senator John McCain. All Congress seems capable of is hand-wringing. So it is up to Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton to revive the national debate on Iraq and to up the pressure on the White House. While it is clear that Bush has no intention of coming up with an exit strategy, there are things he could do to give his successor a better chance at containing the chaos after American troops leave.

A rational debate must first recognize that Iraq is still a very dangerous place. An increase in American forces last year initially produced a steep decline in insurgent attacks. But attacks in April killed more than 50 American troops, the highest death toll for a single month since last September.

Americans also need a full accounting of the American-financed and American-led military training programs in Iraq, and a better explanation of why Iraqi forces remain so weak. Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki's decision to finally challenge some Shiite militias was a good thing, but it exposed how the Iraqi Army remains unprepared - even now - to fight by itself.

We are encouraged that Maliki chose to talk to Tehran about its role in arming and financing militias. It is long past time for Iranian leaders to hear directly - and firmly - from their Shiite brethren in Baghdad that such destabilizing behavior must stop. The United States also needs to engage Iran, Syria and all of Iraq's neighbors. They need to understand that more chaos in Iraq is not in their interest.

It is shocking that the United States and Iraq still have no strategy for dealing with more than 4 million Iraqis who have been driven from their homes; 2.7 million people are internally displaced, and there are another 1.5 million or more refugees in Syria and Jordan. This is not only a question of human suffering. It threatens to spread Iraq's chaos far beyond its borders.

Both Iraq and the United States must take responsibility. Baghdad, awash in oil profits, must provide more aid to its own people. Washington must provide more aid and allow in many more than the 12,000 refugees it has pledged to accept for this year. We fear that it is unlikely to meet even that meager target.

The list of failings and missions not accomplished doesn't stop there. Millions of Iraqis still don't have clean water and medical care, thousands are jobless, the government is still dragging its feet on important reforms like an oil sharing law.

Bush no longer declares "Mission Accomplished." Quite the opposite. He has made clear that he will keep troops in Iraq until he leaves office - and then abandon the mess to his successor. The three senators who want his job should insist that he address these problems now.