

Bush's billions will prolong Iraq's woes

President George W. Bush's request for \$71bn for military operations and reconstruction in Iraq signals the US's intention to sustain its military occupation for the indefinite future. The president has invited other countries to add money and troops as well. They should refuse the invitation until there is a clear timetable for a rapid US troop withdrawal and a transition to a sovereign Iraqi government.

The Bush administration's commitment in Iraq is enormous and growing. It dwarfs initiatives in education, worker training, childcare, disease control, international poverty reduction, even homeland security. In one swoop, Mr Bush has committed nearly 0.7 per cent of US gross national product for the coming year, on top of about 0.6 per cent of GNP during the past 12 months.

At some point, this expense will prove politically explosive in the US; but not quite yet. A broad section of the public strongly supports the demonstration of US toughness in the face of the "enemy", and erroneously lumps Saddam Hussein among the perpetrators of the attacks of September 11 2001. The administration plays on the public's confusion and fears.

Yet from the vantage point of Iraq's recovery, the US occupation is a dead end. Even 140,000 US soldiers on the ground are unable to stop the wanton destruction of infrastructure, which has cut Iraq's oil exports by more than 1m barrels a day, or roughly \$10bn a year at current world market prices. These attacks will continue. America's occupation is a lightning rod for a wide range of violent groups, including Ba'athist die-hards, Shia nationalists and newly arrived al-Qaeda fighters. Oil pipelines, power pylons and water supply stations are easy targets. So too are American soldiers on patrol.

America has no workable plan for legitimate Iraqi government. Its leading Shia backer has just been assassinated and other moderate collaborators undoubtedly risk the same fate. Even if a majority of Iraqis were to support a government friendly to the US, a violent and sizeable minority would be able to undermine that government by terror and mobilisation of nationalist fervour. Such problems would exist even if Iraq were not deeply riven between its Shia, Sunni and Kurdish populations and feuding sub-groups within these larger groups. Given the history of US engagement in the region, its rhetorical support for democracy in Iraq will almost certainly prove to be no more than skin deep especially when Islamic parties achieve political success, as they surely will.

Mr Bush and his team believe the situation will stabilise step by step. They express confidence that anti-terror raids will vanquish the enemy; that improved public services will win the hearts and minds of the population; and that the continued US military presence will become an accepted fact on the ground. These are the same illusions of Israel in the West Bank, Russia and now the US in Afghanistan, and America in Vietnam a generation ago. The occupation strategy fails because it is

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flawed at the core. The military occupier has motives that are un-acceptable to a significant part of the population.

The fatal flaw in the US occupation is that America is in Iraq not to create democracy, hasten economic development, capture weapons of mass destruction or fight terrorists but to create a long-term military and political base to protect the flow of Middle East oil. This much is widely appreciated throughout the Gulf region, where the local population has been treated to a century of contempt, first by the British Empire and later by the US. Decade after decade has seen these two powers oppose democratic rule, topple popular governments and side with autocratic and corrupt rulers, always in the interest of oil. The US and British public may forget or at least be encouraged to forget that Mr Hussein was their ally in the 1980s as he fought Iran, only to be recast as the Hitler of the 1990s. The people in Iraq, and the rest of the region, do not forget such things.

There is certainly no sure course to achieving Iraqi stability, much less democracy, but that is no reason for a continued US occupation. The longer the US stays, the longer will be the agony in Iraq, both economically and politically. One increasingly popular argument in the US is that even if the war was wrong in the first place, America cannot simply "cut and run", since that would show cowardice and fecklessness to America's foes. This argument fails to recognise that America's continued occupation will delay real solutions, not create them, and at a massive cost in dollars and lives.

The appropriate course is a transition under a United Nations mandate to Iraqi sovereignty within a year, with a timetable for withdrawing all US troops and their partial replacement by troops mainly from Islamic countries. Iraq does not need any foreign assistance beyond the next year, as it is a middle-income country sitting on the world's second largest reserves of oil. It does not even need much support for the coming year, since the Iraqi budget can recoup another \$10bn or more if the pipelines are simply allowed to function. It will not, however, recover under any circumstances if the pipelines continue to be destroyed.

If the US withdraws quickly, as it should, it can save well over half of the \$51bn requested for the direct costs of military occupation during the coming 12 months, and allocate about \$10bn for reconstruction to the Iraqi budget. At \$400 per capita in Iraq, this \$10bn would still be more than enough assistance for the coming year without any more funds from other countries. Total outlays from the US would be on the order of \$30bn rather than \$71bn.

The Bush administration will probably get the Congressional go-ahead to spend the \$71bn, perhaps even without much debate. Yet the public support is premised on false grounds and is therefore likely to prove evanescent. Perhaps for these reasons, the administration has not asked for an iota of sacrifice from voters through budget cuts or tax rises and instead has simply enlarged the budget deficit to an astounding \$530bn for fiscal year 2004.

The administration may or may not squeeze by in next year's elections in what is likely to be a close and bitterly divided vote, but it will face a treacherous path as its illusions continue to collide with hard realities. The calls for withdrawal will slowly take hold in the US. American politics will become increasingly polarised and

unstable in the process, and this could even lead the US to lash out elsewhere. Mr Bush has doubled his bet in Iraq and the whole world may lose in the gamble.

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