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Bush's New Iraq Argument: It Could Be Worse

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Of all the words that President Bush used at his news conference this week to defend his policies in Iraq, the one that did not pass his lips was "progress."

For three years, the president tried to reassure Americans that more progress was being made in Iraq than they realized. But with Iraq either in civil war or on the brink of it, Bush dropped the unseen-progress argument in favor of the contention that things could be even worse.

The shifting rhetoric reflected a broader pessimism that has reached into even some of the most optimistic corners of the administration -- a sense that the Iraq venture has taken a dark turn and will not be resolved anytime soon. Bush advisers once believed that if they met certain benchmarks, such as building a constitutional democracy and training a new Iraqi army, the war would be won. Now they believe they have more or less met those goals, yet the war rages on.

While still committed to the venture, officials have privately told friends and associates outside government that they have grown discouraged in recent months. Even the death of al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq proved not to be the turning point they expected, they have told associates, and other developments have been relentlessly dispiriting, with fewer signs of hope.

Bush acknowledged this week that he has been discouraged as well. "Frustrated?" he asked. "Sometimes I'm frustrated. Rarely surprised. Sometimes I'm happy. This is -- but war is not a time of joy. These aren't joyous times. These are challenging times and they're difficult times and they're straining the psyche of our country."

Presidential counselor Dan Bartlett said Bush and his advisers still believe progress is being made and the war will be won. "No question about it, the last three months have been much more challenging," he said. "Are we always going to be pleased with the pace? No. There are days that are frustrating. But is the overall direction going the right way? . . . The answer to that is yes."

The tone represents a striking change from what critics considered an overly rosy portrayal of Iraq, and the latest stage in a year-long evolution in message.

With sectarian violence flaring into some of the worst bloodshed since the March 2003 invasion, the White House felt the need to connect with the anxiety in the American public. "Most of the people rightly are concerned about the security situation, as is the president," Bartlett said.

But with crucial midterm elections just 2 1/2 months away, Bush and his team are trying to turn the public debate away from whether the Iraq invasion has worked out to what would happen if U.S. troops were withdrawn, as some Democrats advocate. The necessity of not failing, Bush advisers believe, is now a more compelling argument than the likelihood of success.

Using such terms as "havoc" at Monday's news conference, Bush made no effort to suggest the situation in Iraq is improving. Instead, he argued: "If you think it's bad now, imagine what Iraq would look like if the United States leaves before this government can defend itself."

Christopher F. Gelpi, a Duke University scholar whose research on public opinion in wartime has been influential in the White House, said Bush has little choice.

"He looks foolish and not credible if he says, 'We're making progress in Iraq,' " Gelpi said. "I think he probably would like to make that argument, but because that's not credible given the facts on the ground, this is the fallback. . . . If the only thing you can say is 'Yes, it's bad, but it could be worse,' that really is a last-ditch argument."

As recently as two weeks ago, Bush was still making the case that things in Iraq are better than they seem. The new Iraqi government "has shown remarkable progress on the political front," he said on Aug. 7, calling its mere existence "quite a remarkable achievement."

The White House and the Republican National Committee regularly send e-mails to supporters and journalists highlighting positive developments. In yesterday's Wall Street Journal, an article by U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad argued that a shift in security operations in Baghdad has shown "positive results" and said that "this initial progress should give Iraqis, as well as Americans, hope about the future."

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said on a radio show this week that violence is largely limited to four of 18 provinces and that "the government now is starting to get its legs under it."

But Bush has been ruminating on the different nature of Iraq and the battle with Islamic radicals and how hard it is to define victory. "Veterans of World War II and Korea will tell you we were able to measure progress based upon miles gained or based upon tanks destroyed, or however people measured war in those days," he said in a speech last week. "This is different . . . and it's hard on the American people, and I understand that."

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), a strong supporter of the war, suggested this week that the Bush team has only itself to blame for setting unrealistic expectations.

"One of the biggest mistakes we made was underestimating the size of the task and the sacrifices that would be required," McCain said. " 'Stuff happens,' 'mission accomplished,' 'last throes,' 'a few dead-enders.' I'm just more familiar with those statements than anyone else because it grieves me so much that we had not told the American people how tough and difficult this task would be."

Such statements, he said, have "contributed enormously to the frustration that Americans feel today because they were led to believe this could be some kind of day at the beach." Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) offered a similar assessment. "I think we undersold how hard the war would be," he told reporters this week. "I think we oversold how easy it would be to create democracy. I think we missed by a mile how much it would cost to rebuild Iraq."

Through much of the war, Bush and his advisers focused on meeting benchmarks laid out for rebuilding Iraq -- writing a new constitution, electing a new parliament, bringing disaffected Sunnis into the government and training Iraqi troops. As long as those benchmarks were met, the president had tangible events to point to as evidence of progress.

But the last step in that original timetable, election of a permanent parliament last December, has come and gone with no end to the violence. When Bush mentioned that election at his news conference, he depicted it not as progress but a sign that Iraqis *want* progress. "It's an indication about the desire for people to live in a free society," he said.

Bush used to mention the number of Iraqi troops trained as another barometer to watch, suggesting that once a new army is in place, it could defend its country. Yet 294,000 Iraqi troops have been trained, just shy of the goal of 325,000, and no U.S. official expects to turn over the war entirely to them anytime soon.

Instead, Bush has publicly emphasized how much his administration is changing tactics to deal with the evolving threats in Iraq, and he has privately reached out for advice about further steps to take. He had

lunch at the Pentagon last week with four Middle East experts to solicit ideas about how to stabilize Iraq.

"I would say he was deeply concerned about how many lives are being lost, both American and Iraqi, and how much this is costing the American taxpayer," said Eric Davis, a Rutgers University professor who was among those invited, who urged Bush to launch a New Deal-style economic program in Iraq. "He would like to see progress sooner rather than later."

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