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## It Came From Planet Bush

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By Dan Froomkin  
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In the alternate universe that President Bush occupies, he gave a smashing speech last night.

Over there, the people of Iraq need our help to save them from the al Qaeda terrorists who intend to overthrow their brave and united government on the way to attacking America. It's a battle of good versus evil. We have 36 countries fighting alongside us. And the fight is going very well indeed. Ordinary life is returning to Baghdad.

A few more things about Bush's universe: There, the president can make things true simply by solemnly pronouncing them from the Oval Office. He can reach out to his critics just by saying he is doing so. And people believe him.

But over here in the real world, things are different.

Iraq is mostly ruled by armed gangs, not a central government. American troops are dying in the crossfire as the country continues to violently disintegrate along ethnic and sectarian lines. We're in it pretty much alone. There's no end in sight. And the real al Qaeda is regrouping in Pakistan.

President Bush is trying and failing to rally support for a war that the majority of Americans have concluded is not worth fighting. He's not going to change anyone's mind because he's too stubborn to change his own. And in any case, his credibility is shot to hell.

### Jaw Droppers

Here's the [text](#) of his speech last night, his eighth prime-time address on Iraq.

Bush opened with this astonishing vision: "In Iraq, an ally of the United States is fighting for its survival. Terrorists and extremists who are at war with us around the world are seeking to topple Iraq's government, dominate the region, and attack us here at home."

In reality, the nearly powerless central government is endangered and marginalized not by terrorists but by internal division. And al Qaeda in Iraq, an insurgent group with nominal ties to the real al Qaeda, is in no position to take over the country, not to mention the region. There is also no evidence that they have any interest in attacking us at home.

Said Bush: "One year ago, much of Baghdad was under siege. . . . Today, . . . ordinary life is beginning to return."

To call anything in today's Baghdad even vaguely normal is flatly outrageous.

Said Bush: "The government has not met its own legislative benchmarks -- and in my meetings with Iraqi leaders, I have made it clear that they must."

But he's been saying that for a long time. And he has even less leverage now, having made it so abundantly clear that his commitment to Iraq is open-ended.

"Our troops in Iraq are performing brilliantly. Along with Iraqi forces, they have captured or killed an

average of more than 1,500 enemy fighters per month since January."

Body counts are a notoriously suspect way of measuring success in an armed conflict -- particularly one where it can be hard to tell enemies from civilians. And in the [past](#), Bush has said he would avoid them.

"Now, because of the measure of success we are seeing in Iraq, we can begin seeing troops come home."

Actually, he has no choice. Pentagon officials have long said Bush's troop buildup could not be sustained past next summer without huge damage to the military.

"The way forward I have described tonight makes it possible, for the first time in years, for people who have been on opposite sides of this difficult debate to come together."

As if. It's basically the same "way forward" -- and what most Americans are looking for is a "way out."

"A free Iraq will marginalize extremists, unleash the talent of its people, and be an anchor of stability in the region."

That's what I think of when I think of Iraq: An anchor of stability.

"We thank the 36 nations who have troops on the ground in Iraq and the many others who are helping that young democracy."

A recent State Department [report](#) shows a total of 25 countries with armed forces in Iraq -- and that [includes](#) Slovakia's six soldiers and Moldova's 11. Non-American troops total under 12,000, with most in non-combat roles, compared to over 160,000 Americans.

And quoting the parents of a dead soldier, Bush said: "We believe this is a war of good and evil."

It's a bit more complicated than that.

## **Incredulous**

On MSNBC last night, anchor [Chris Matthews](#) was incredulous: "The fact that we have 36 countries fighting on our side in Iraq must be news to the soldiers over there. I don't know who these people are or how many divisions they have. I mean, all we read about in the papers are American GIs getting killed by IEDs and terrible accidents and all kinds of enemy action over there, usually in the battle of the civil war over there. The idea we're one of 36 countries fighting the war I think is ludicrous and why the president would throw that out there, I think it only opens him up to ridicule."

Matthews later asked Democratic Sen. and presidential candidate Joseph Biden about "the strange world we had described to us tonight... We're given a picture in 20 minutes of a country over there, an ally, you know, like Chiang Kai-shek used to be against the Japanese or Hungary against the Soviets, an ally, a country we care about and it's fighting for its life against our enemy, which is al Qaeda. No real references except once to the fact there's a civil war going on in that country. The notion that we're one of 37 countries fighting over there against the bad guys. There's so much of this that's truly -- and I don't mean this in a cartoon sense -- fantastic. When you're with the president, does he live in this world or does he just sell it?"

Biden's reply: "I don't know, Chris."

On CNN, [Anderson Cooper](#) asked Iraq correspondent Michael Ware for his overall impressions of the speech.

Ware: "Well, Anderson, my first impression is, wow. I mean, it's one thing to return to the status quo, to the situation we had nine months ago, with 130,000 U.S. troops stuck here for the foreseeable future. It's another thing to perpetuate the myth. I mean, I won't go into detail, like the president's characterizations of the Iraqi government as an ally, or that the people of Anbar, who support the Sunni insurgency, asked America for help, or to address this picture of a Baghdad that exists only in the president's mind.

"Let me just refer to this, what the president said, that, if America were to be driven out of Iraq, extremists of all strains would be emboldened. They are now. Al Qaeda could gain new recruits and new sanctuaries. They have that now. Iran would benefit from the chaos and be encouraged in its efforts to gain nuclear weapons and dominate the region. It is now.

"Iraq would face a humanitarian -- humanitarian crisis. It does now. And that we would leave our children a far more dangerous world. That's happening now."

Cooper then played Ware Bush's quote about how "ordinary life is beginning to return."

Cooper: "What he didn't mention is, there are four million Iraqis not in their homes. Neighborhoods here in Baghdad have been ethnically cleansed."

WARE: "Absolutely. And if by the -- if the president means by ordinary life, families essentially living locked up in their homes, in almost perpetual darkness, without refrigeration, or perhaps constantly struggling -- struggling for ever more expensive gas to run generators, if he means waiting in their homes, wondering if government death squads will drag them off and torture and execute them, if he means living in sectarian, cleansed neighborhoods where people who were your friends have had to flee, if he's talking about living in communities that are protected by militias, then, yes, life has returned to ordinary."

[Nancy Youssef](#) writes for McClatchy Newspapers: "Thursday night, Bush declared success and painted a rosy picture. . . .

"There was no mention of a range of government reports, from a National Security Estimate to a Government Accountability Office report and even the testimony this week of U.S. Iraq commander Army Gen. David Petraeus, that has said Iraqi civilian casualties remain high and that it will be years before Iraqi security forces can take control.

"Other reports have stressed that Iraqis continue to flee their homes looking for safety at unprecedented rates and that Shiite militias continue to force Sunni Muslims from their homes. Baghdad residents complain that their city has become even more segregated than before the surge, divided now by hastily erected concrete walls to keep rival sects separate. . . .

"Largely gone from the president's speech Thursday was his [January insistence](#) that the Iraqi government meet 18 benchmarks and sort out its differences on the most divisive issues in Iraq.

"In January, the talk was tough: 'America will hold the Iraqi government to the benchmarks it has announced,' Bush said then. 'I've made it clear to the prime minister and Iraq's other leaders that America's commitment is not open-ended. If the Iraqi government does not follow through on its promises, it will lose the support of the American people -- and it will lose the support of the Iraqi people. Now is the time to act.'"

[Steven Lee Myers and Carl Hulse](#) write in the New York Times: "Mr. Bush, in his remarks, seemed to hope that by beginning a withdrawal, it would mollify those who were increasingly alarmed by the size and cost of the commitment and unite Americans behind the war in a way they have rarely been from the start. 'The way forward I have described tonight makes it possible, for the first time in years, for people who have been on opposite sides of this difficult debate to come together,' he said.

"That seemed unlikely. . . .

"At times, his view seemed even rosier than General Petraeus's did.

"His descriptions noted positive developments -- 'Ordinary life is beginning to return,' he said -- while leaving out the grim realities of life in the shadow of death, without basic regular electricity or other services.

"He warned that pulling out of Iraq could cause 'a humanitarian nightmare' but did not acknowledge that millions of Iraqis have already been displaced or have fled to neighboring countries.

"He noted that Iraq's government was 'sharing oil revenues with the provinces' without mentioning that discussions on a draft law to institutionalize the process -- a key benchmark dictated by Congress -- appear to have collapsed."

[Glenn Kessler](#) writes in The Washington Post: "In his speech last night, President Bush made a case for progress in Iraq by citing facts and statistics that at times contradicted recent government reports or his own words."

For instance: "At one point, the president cited a recent [report](#) by a commission headed by retired Marine Gen. James Jones, saying that 'the Iraqi army is becoming more capable, although there is still a great deal of work to be done to improve the national police.'

"But the report said Iraq's army will be unable to take over internal security from U.S. forces in the next 12 to 18 months and 'cannot yet meaningfully contribute to denying terrorists safe haven.' It also described the 25,000-member national police force as riddled with sectarianism and corruption, and it recommended that it be disbanded."

[Fred Kaplan](#) writes for Slate: "President Bush's TV address tonight was the worst speech he's ever given on the war in Iraq, and that's saying a lot. Every premise, every proposal, nearly every substantive point was sheer fiction. The only question is whether he was being deceptive or delusional.

"The biggest fiction was that because of the 'success' of the surge, we can reduce U.S. troop levels in Iraq from 20 combat brigades to 15 by next July. Gen. David Petraeus has recommended this step, and President George W. Bush will order it so.

"Let's be clear one more time about this claim: The surge of five extra combat brigades (bringing the total from 15 to 20) started in January. Their 15-month tours of duty will begin to expire next April. The Army and Marines have no combat units ready to replace them. The service chiefs refuse to extend the tours any further. The president refuses to mobilize the reserves any further. And so, the surge will be over by next July. This has been understood from the outset. It is the result of simple arithmetic, not of anyone's decision, much less some putative success."

[Dick Polman](#) blogs for the Philadelphia Inquirer that Bush "came up with a few lines that would be downright comical if not for the fact that our soldiers are fighting and dying over there."

### **An Enduring Relationship?**

Bush's most surprising announcement yesterday was of his intention to guarantee "U.S. political, economic, and security engagement [with Iraq] that extends beyond my presidency." Saying that Iraqi leaders "have asked for an enduring relationship with America," Bush said "we are ready to begin building that relationship -- in a way that protects our interests in the region and requires many fewer American troops."

Bush apparently elaborated on this idea at an on-background lunch with television anchors yesterday.

As [Brian Williams](#) blogged for NBC News: "[T]he president is known to favor a presence modeled -- at far fewer numbers of troops -- on that of U.S. forces in South Korea."

For a summary of what's troubling about the South Korea analogy, see my May 31 column: [50 More Years in Iraq?](#)

On CNN last night, [Cooper](#) asked correspondent Candy Crowley: "Candy, this long-term commitment was not what the American people were told would be needed during the buildup to the war."

Crowley: "Well, and -- and it's going to be a problem, I think. You know, when you talk to people on Capitol Hill, even critics of the president, all of them have known that U.S. troops could not come out quickly, that it would take a year or two years."

"But, when the president starts talking about troops staying there beyond my administration, a long-term stay there, I think this is something that will be the source of conversation, because it is not what people thought they were buying into."

Later, former presidential adviser David Gergen chimed in: "What we know is that the president met earlier today with a handful of journalists, and it's been reported out of that, that he talked about signing up an agreement with Iraq that would commit the United States to the security of Iraq, in much the same way we have been committed to Korea."

"We have been now in Korea for over half-a-century. That was a major, dramatic commitment by the United States that required the approval of the United States' Congress. If the president is seriously talking about such a commitment -- and he certainly hinted heavily at that tonight -- that would be a major new commitment, going well past his presidency, and will cause a storm on Capitol Hill."

### **Fiddling With the Language**

[David E. Sanger](#) writes in the New York Times: "Mr. Bush's speech was the culmination of a monthlong, highly orchestrated game plan to change the political debate in Washington and the country. But in the end, the speech once again raised the question of what America's mission in Iraq really is -- and how long it will last."

"It also exemplified the balancing act likely to consume the last 16 months of Mr. Bush's presidency, as he tries to hold together wavering members of his party with promises of drawdowns as soon as conditions allow while still talking about a role in Iraq and the region modeled on America's five-decades-long presence on the Korean Peninsula."

"Many times in recent months, he has told visitors to the White House that he needs to get to the Korea model -- a politically sustainable American deployment to keep the lid on the Middle East."

"That, of course, is a goal very different from the 'victory' Mr. Bush was touting less than two years ago. But as strategies have come and gone, Mr. Bush's language has changed."

[Doyle McManus](#) writes in the Los Angeles Times: "For more than four years since the invasion of Iraq, President Bush most often has defined his objective there with a single, stirring word: 'Victory.'"

"'Victory in Iraq is vital for the United States of America,' he told cadets at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in May. . . ."

"But this week, the word 'victory' disappeared from the president's lexicon. It was replaced by a slightly more ambiguous goal: 'Success.'"

### **Backfire?**

[Massimo Calabresi](#) writes for Time: "Bush's trumpeting of what he called a 'return on success' could end up backfiring. Bringing the war into America's living rooms is never a safe political bet. And if news of a slow drawdown may be popular, Bush himself still is not. Some key Hill Republicans, in fact, were upset that he returned front and center on the issue at a time when the White House had so carefully ceded the selling of the surge to Petraeus and Crocker. 'Why would he threaten the momentum we have?' says one frustrated Capitol Hill Republican strategist with ties to the GOP leadership. 'You have an unpopular President going onto prime time television, interrupting Americans' TV programs, to remind them of why they don't like him.'"

Hill Republicans, Calabresi writes, claim Bush is "'hitching his wagon' to the popular and respected Petraeus because he knows his place in history is at stake. 'He's more concerned about his legacy than he is about helping his Capitol Hill Republican colleagues,' says the Republican strategist."

[Jonathan Weisman and Paul Kane](#) write in The Washington Post: "If the prime targets of President Bush's appeal for patience last night were moderates in his own party, his speech may have fallen flat.

"Republican lawmakers, facing tough reelection bids in the midst of an ongoing war, reacted with grave concern to the president's call for only modest troop reductions and no dramatic change of mission in Iraq. And the lawmakers' tone could prove critical when the Senate takes up defense policy legislation next week, a step that will revive the debate over whether and how the legislative branch should seek to change the course of the war."

## Opinion Watch

The [New York Times](#) editorial board writes: "Mr. Bush was clear last night -- as he was when he addressed the nation in January, September of last year, the December before that and in April 2004 -- that his only real plan is to confuse enough Americans and cow enough members of Congress to let him muddle along and saddle his successor with this war that should never have been started."

The [San Francisco Chronicle](#) editorial board writes: "President Bush last night once again tried to repackage a 'stay the course' policy that has been a four-year-disaster in Iraq.

"No one should be fooled by the president's attempt to portray the strategy he laid out in a nationally televised speech as a significant change or act of conciliation."

The [USA Today](#) editorial board writes: "When President Bush brought down the curtain on a week of extraordinary political stagecraft Thursday night, the audience was left to contemplate the course of the Iraq war in a new way: one stripped of benchmarks, and one that would commit some undefined number of U.S. forces to Iraq for many years to come. . . .

"After setting so many goals and being so consistently embarrassed by his failure to achieve them, Bush is trying to avoid more of the same, no matter his bluff assurance in Iraq last week and on TV Thursday night that everything is going great."

[Paul Krugman](#) writes in his New York Times opinion column (subscription required): "Mr. Bush's actions have not been those of a leader seriously trying to win a war. They have, however, been what you'd expect from a man whose plan is to keep up appearances for the next 16 months, never mind the cost in lives and money, then shift the blame for failure onto his successor."

[Joseph L. Galloway](#) writes in his McClatchy Newspapers opinion column: "It's a long journey from now to January 20, 2009, and the blood of many Americans and even more Iraqis will flow freely and stain the hands of those who allow this insane war to continue at the behest of a stubborn, unseeing, unthinking man from Crawford, Texas."

## Dissension Within the Military

[David S. Cloud](#) writes in the New York Times that the Bush-Petraeus vision "remains deeply unpopular to some current and retired officers, who say the White House and its battlefield commander are continuing to strain the troops, with little prospect of long-term success.

"It is the second time in 10 months that Mr. Bush has opted for higher troop levels in Iraq than are favored by some of his senior military advisers. Among those who supported a smaller troop increase than the one Mr. Bush ordered last January were members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"Now, some of his advisers would prefer setting a faster timetable for drawing the force back down.

"Some even suggest that Mr. Bush's portrayal of the strategy as relying heavily on recommendations from General Petraeus has been more than a little disingenuous, given that it was unlikely that a battlefield commander would repudiate his own plans."

For instance: "Even before General Petraeus appeared before Congress this week, Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the Army chief of staff, last week questioned the significance of what his colleague had achieved. . . .

"I think a smaller force will cause Iraqis to do more faster,' General Casey [said] at a breakfast sponsored by [Government Executive](#) magazine."

### **The Pre-Briefing Spin**

Here is the [transcript](#) of a briefing yesterday afternoon by two anonymous administration officials.

[David S. Cloud](#) writes in the New York Times: "Though President Bush said he would withdraw five Army combat brigades and several Marine units from Iraq by next summer, as the top commander in Iraq had recommended, the White House was careful on Thursday not to be pinned down on just how many soldiers would remain."

The Times's [Sanger](#) detected a change in attitude within Bush's top staffers: "'Guess what, this is Iraq,' one senior administration official told reporters on Thursday afternoon as they pressed him on whether Mr. Bush had abandoned hope of bringing about change in the time frames he had discussed in January. Another senior official argued that the White House had taken an overly America-centric approach. 'It turned out that we could get a lot done in the provinces without passing oil-revenue laws,' the official said."

One of the "senior administration officials" outed himself when pulling rank in a circular argument over how many troops would actually be coming home.

Senior Administration Official: "Okay, I used to be the J3."

That would be Lt. Gen. Douglas E. Lute, the White House's new "war czar," whose [bio](#) says he served for "more than two years as Director of Operations (J-3) at US Central Command during which he oversaw combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as other operations in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Horn of Africa."

### **'It Doesn't Matter'**

On his last day as press secretary, Tony Snow made the circuit of the morning shows. Here he is on CBS with [Harry Smith](#), trying to counter the notion that Bush had no choice but to announce limited troop withdrawals.

Snow: "The fact is if we needed to keep troops in Iraq, we would have the troops -- we would do it."

Smith: "But you would have to increase the lengths of deployments, would you not?"

Snow: "You know, it doesn't matter, Harry, as a commander in chief you do what you have to do in a time of war."

Smith (sighing): "But everybody and their brother says if you want to break the Army, increase troop deployments."

Snow: "Actually no. I think David Petraeus knows a thing or two about it and that's not his view."

### **More From the Luncheon**

[Williams](#) blogs for NBC News with more from the presidential luncheon: "[W]hen asked about Robert Draper's new book, 'Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush' -- a portion of which deals with the disbanding of the Iraqi Army -- the president (who indicated he has not read the book) insisted there was no Iraqi Army left to re-constitute back at that time, saying most of Saddam's former fighters had been driven to the north where they fled and dispersed. I pointed out that this seemed like a new response; for four and a half years, the disbanding of the Army has been seen as one of the chief failings of the Iraq war. The president seemed un-bothered by that perception."

In fact, the issue was whether to recall the army or disband it; Bush's position is disingenuous at best.

Williams also describes this intriguing statement: "He admitted to being out-smarted by the enemy at several stages of the Iraq war."

### **Petraeus Watch**

[Peter Baker and Karen DeYoung](#) write in The Washington Post that in an interview yesterday, "Petraeus offered clues to secret planning that he did not mention during his congressional testimony. He described Iraq as a quilt in which secure 'patches' will be added gradually until they fill the country and can finally be stitched together by June 2009. 'Then you have a sustainable system,' he said. 'Then you have an Iraq.'"

"A map prepared to illustrate the concept showed Iraq today as a blank space with several discrete 'patches' in Anbar and in the northern and southern parts of the country. On a second map labeled 'Intermediate Term. NLT [No Later Than] June 2009,' the entire country was covered with patches. An Iraqi national flag covered a third, undated map, signaling when Iraq would be entirely in charge of its own fate."

Here are [audio excerpts](#) of the interview.

[Eugene Robinson](#) writes in his Washington Post opinion column: "Gen. David Petraeus likes to describe the Iraq he envisions as a patchwork quilt. You establish security in a neighborhood over here, bring peace to a village over there, create more and more of these scraps of relative tranquility -- and then stitch the heterogeneous pieces together."

"The problem is with the seams. They have a tendency to unravel."

### **Bush's Sheik**

[Joshua Partlow, Ann Scott Tyson and Robin Wright](#) write in The Washington Post: "A charismatic tribal leader who allied himself with the United States and rallied fractious Sunni groups against extremists who claim links to al-Qaeda was killed Thursday afternoon when a bomb exploded outside his house in Anbar province."

"The efforts of Abdul Sattar Abu Risha became the centerpiece of the Bush administration's campaign to prove its troop buildup in Iraq has been a success. President Bush, during a visit to Anbar last week, met with Abu Risha and said the province suggested 'what the future of Iraq can look like.'"

Who is this guy Bush shook hands with? "Abu Risha, who was in his mid-30s, had amassed many enemies. He was called a warlord and a highway bandit, an oil smuggler and an opportunist, who sold out the Sunni resistance for American military friendship. He often dismissed Iraq's government as dysfunctional and regularly demanded more money and guns from anyone who would listen.

"But in the first hours after Abu Risha's death, his legacy seemed to unite Iraqi leaders across the sectarian spectrum."

### Today's News

[Jennifer Loven](#) writes for the Associated Press: "The White House told Congress Friday that Iraqi leaders gained little new ground on key military and political goals, a discouraging assessment a day after President Bush said progress justifies a large continued U.S. military presence there.

"The report underscored the difficulty of Bush's argument that a continuing American sacrifice was creating space for Iraqi leaders to make gains on tamping down the sectarian fighting that leaves Iraq persistently fractured and violent."

Here's the [report](#).

### Cartoon Watch

[Stuart Carlson](#) on riding in circles.

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