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Federalism, Not Partition

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By Joseph R. Biden Jr. and Leslie H. Gelb
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The Bush administration and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki greeted last week's Senate vote on Iraq policy -- based on a plan we proposed in 2006 -- with misrepresentations and untruths. Seventy-five senators, including 26 Republicans, voted to promote a political settlement based on decentralized power-sharing. It was a life raft for an [Iraq](#) policy that is adrift.

Instead, Maliki and the administration -- through our embassy in [Baghdad](#) -- distorted the Biden-Brownback amendment beyond recognition, charging that we seek to "partition or divide Iraq by intimidation, force or other means."

We want to set the record straight. If the United States can't put this federalism idea on track, we will have no chance for a political settlement in Iraq and, without that, no chance for leaving Iraq without leaving chaos behind.

First, our plan is not partition, though even some supporters and the media mistakenly call it that. It would hold Iraq together by bringing to life the federal system enshrined in its constitution. A federal Iraq is a united Iraq but one in which power devolves to regional governments, with a limited central government responsible for common concerns such as protecting borders and distributing oil revenue.

Iraqis have no familiarity with federalism, which, absent an occupier or a dictator, has historically been the only path to keeping disunited countries whole. We can point to our federal system and how it began with most power in the hands of the states. We can point to similar solutions in the [United Arab Emirates](#), [Spain](#) and [Bosnia](#). Most Iraqis want to keep their country whole. But if Iraqi leaders keep hearing from U.S. leaders that federalism amounts to or will lead to partition, that's what they will believe.

The Bush administration's quixotic alternative has been to promote a strong central government in Baghdad. That central government doesn't function; it is corrupt and widely regarded as irrelevant. It has not produced political reconciliation -- and there is no evidence it will.

Second, we are not trying to impose our plan. If the Iraqis don't want it, they won't and shouldn't take it, as the Senate amendment makes clear. But Iraqis and the [White House](#) might consider the facts. Iraq's constitution already provides for a federal system. As for the regions forming along sectarian lines, the constitution leaves the choice to the people of its 18 provinces.

The White House can hardly complain that we would force unwanted solutions on Iraqis. [President Bush](#) did not hesitate to push [Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafari](#) out of office to make way for Maliki, and he may yet do the same to Maliki.

The United States has responsibilities in Iraq that we cannot run away from. The Iraqis will need our help in explaining and lining up support for a federal solution. With 160,000 Americans at risk in Iraq, with hundreds of billions of dollars spent, and with more than 3,800 dead and nearly 28,000 wounded, we also have a right to be heard.

Third, our plan would not produce "suffering and bloodshed," as a U.S. Embassy statement irresponsibly suggested. And it is hard to imagine more suffering and bloodshed than we've already seen from government-tolerated militias, jihadists, [Baathists](#) and administration ineptitude. More than 4 million Iraqis have fled their homes, most for fear of sectarian violence.

The Bush administration should be helping Iraqis make federalism work -- through an agreement over the fair distribution of oil revenue; the safe return of refugees; integrating militia members into local security forces; leveraging the shared interest of other countries in a stable Iraq; and refocusing capacity-building and aid on the provinces and regions -- not scaring them off by equating federalism to partition, sectarianism and foreign bullying.

To confuse matters more, the administration has conjured a "bottom-up" strategy that looks like federalism and smells like federalism -- but is, in reality, a recipe for chaos.

"Bottom-up" seems to mean that the United States will support any group, anywhere, that will fight [al-Qaeda](#) or Shiite extremists. Now, it always made sense to seek allies among tribal chiefs to fight common terrorist enemies. But to simply back these groups as they appear, without any overall political context or purpose, is to invite anarchy. Nothing will fragment Iraq more than a bottom-up approach that pits one group against another and fails to knit these parts into governable wholes.

Federalism is the one formula that fits the seemingly contradictory desires of most Iraqis to remain whole and of various groups to govern themselves for the time being. It also recognizes the reality of the choice we face in Iraq: a managed transition to federalism or actual partition through civil war.

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