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Why I Declined To Serve

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By John J. Sheehan
Monday, April 16, 2007; A17

Service to the nation is both a responsibility and an honor for every citizen presented with the opportunity. This is especially true in times of war and crisis. Today, because of the war in Iraq, this nation is in a crisis of confidence and is confused about its foreign policy direction, especially in the Middle East.

When asked whether I would like to be considered for the position of [White House implementation manager](#) for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, I knew that it would be a difficult assignment, but also an honor, and that this was a serious task that needed to be done. I served as the military assistant to the deputy secretary of defense in the mid-1980s and more recently as commander in chief of the Atlantic Command during the Cuban and Haitian migrant operation and the reconstruction of Haiti. Based on my experience, I knew that a White House position of this nature would require interagency acceptance. Cabinet-level agencies, organizations and their leadership must buy in to the position's roles and responsibilities. Most important, Cabinet-level personalities must develop and accept a clear definition of the strategic approach to policy.

What I found in discussions with current and former members of this administration is that there is no agreed-upon strategic view of the Iraq problem or the region. In my view, there are essentially three strategies in play simultaneously.

The first I call "the Woody Hayes basic ground attack," which is basically gaining one yard -- or one city block -- at a time. Given unconstrained time and resources, one could control the outcome in Iraq and provide the necessary security to move on to the next stage of development.

The second strategy starts with security but adds benchmarks for both the U.S. and Iraqi participants and applies time constraints that should guide them toward a desired outcome. The value of this strategy is that everyone knows the quantifiable and measurable objectives that fit within an overall strategic framework.

The third strategy takes a larger view of the region and the desired end state. Simply put, where does Iraq fit in a larger regional context? The United States has and will continue to have strategic interests in the greater Middle East well after the Iraq crisis is resolved and, as a matter of national interest, will maintain forces in the region in some form. The Iraq invasion has created a real and existential crisis for nearly all Middle Eastern countries and created divisions among our traditional European allies, making cooperation on other issues more difficult. In the case of Iran, we have allowed Tehran to develop more policy options and tools than it had a few years ago. Iran is an ideological and destabilizing threat to its neighbors and, more important, to U.S. interests.

Of the three strategies in play, the third is the most important but, unfortunately, is the least developed and articulated by this administration.

The day-to-day work of the White House implementation manager overseeing Iraq and Afghanistan would require a great deal of emotional and intellectual energy resolving critical resource issues in a bureaucracy that, to date, has not functioned well. Activities such as the current surge operations should fit into an overall strategic framework. There has to be linkage between short-term operations and strategic objectives that represent long-term U.S. and regional interests, such as assured access to energy resources and support for stable, Western-oriented countries. These interests will require a serious

dialogue and partnership with countries that live in an increasingly dangerous neighborhood. We cannot "shorthand" this issue with concepts such as the "democratization of the region" or the constant refrain by a small but powerful group that we are going to "win," even as "victory" is not defined or is frequently redefined.

It would have been a great honor to serve this nation again. But after thoughtful discussions with people both in and outside of this administration, I concluded that the current Washington decision-making process lacks a linkage to a broader view of the region and how the parts fit together strategically. We got it right during the early days of Afghanistan -- and then lost focus. We have never gotten it right in Iraq. For these reasons, I asked not to be considered for this important White House position. These huge shortcomings are not going to be resolved by the assignment of an additional individual to the White House staff. They need to be addressed before an implementation manager is brought on board.

The writer is a retired Marine Corps general.

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