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**How To Change Iraq**

Bush Should Start By Admitting Fault

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By Madeleine K. Albright  
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The threshold question in any war is: What are we fighting for? Our troops, especially, deserve a convincing answer.

In [Iraq](#), the list of missions that were tried on but didn't fit includes: protection from weapons of mass destruction, creating a model democracy in the Arab world, punishing those responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks and stopping terrorists from catching the next plane to [New York](#). The latest mission, linked to the "surge" of troops this year, was to give Iraqi leaders the security and maneuvering room needed to make stabilizing political arrangements -- which they have thus far shown little interest in doing.

A cynic might suggest that the military's real mission is to enable [President Bush](#) to continue denying that his invasion has evolved into disaster. A less jaded view might identify three goals: to prevent Iraq from becoming a haven for [al-Qaeda](#), a client state of [Iran](#) or a spark that inflames regionwide war. These goals respond not to dangers that prompted the invasion but to those that resulted from it. Our troops are being asked to risk their lives to solve problems our civilian leaders created. The president is beseeching us to fear failure, but he has yet to explain how our military can succeed given Iraq's tangled politics and his administration's lack of credibility.

This disconnect between mission and capabilities should be at the center of debate as Gen. [David Petraeus](#) and Ambassador [Ryan Crocker](#) report on the war's status and congressional leaders prepare their fall strategies. Despite the hopes of many, this debate is unlikely to end the war soon; nor will it produce fresh support for our present dismal course. Although U.S. troop levels will surely start to come down, big decisions about whether and under what circumstances to complete the withdrawal seem certain to remain for the next president, when he or she takes office. Yet this should not preclude Democrats and Republicans from trying to agree on ways to minimize the damage before then.

According to the [National Intelligence Estimate released](#) last month, the recent modest but extremely hard-won military gains will mean little "unless there is a fundamental shift in the factors driving Iraqi political and security developments."

Given the depth of the sectarian divisions within Iraq, such a fundamental shift will not occur through Iraqi actions alone. Given America's lack of leverage, it will not result from our patrols, benchmarks, speeches or "[surprise](#)" [presidential visits](#) to [Anbar province](#). That leaves coordinated international assistance as the only option.

[The Balkans](#) are at peace today through the joint efforts of the United States, the [European Union](#) and the [United Nations](#) -- all of which worked to help moderate leaders inside the region. A similar strategy should have been part of our Iraq policy from the outset but has never been seriously attempted.

Is such an initiative still viable? Perhaps. The United Nations has pledged to become more involved. [Europe's](#) new leaders -- led by [Nicolas Sarkozy](#), [Angela Merkel](#) and [Gordon Brown](#) -- understand their region's stake in Iraq's future and seem willing to assist. The Saudi, Jordanian and Syrian governments all view Iraqi instability as a profound security threat. Turkish and Kurdish representatives recently signed an agreement to cooperate along their troubled border. Iran is the wildest of cards, but it would be unlikely to isolate itself from a broad international program aimed at reconciliation. If it does, it would only hand a political victory to us and to the many Iraqi leaders, Shiite and Sunni alike, who would prefer to minimize Iranian influence.

President Bush could do his part by admitting what the world knows -- that many prewar criticisms of the invasion were on target. Such an admission would be just the shock a serious diplomatic project would need. It would make it easier for European and Arab leaders to help, as their constituents are reluctant to bail out a president who still insists that he was right and they were wrong. Our troops face death every day; the least the president can do is face the truth.

A coordinated international effort could help Iraq by patrolling borders, aiding reconstruction, further training its army and police, and strengthening legislative and judicial institutions. It could also send a unified message to Iraq's sectarian leaders that a political power-sharing arrangement that recognizes majority rule and protects minority rights is the only solution and is also attainable.

If there is a chance to avoid deeper disaster in Iraq, it depends on a psychological transformation so people begin preparing to compete for power peacefully instead of plotting how to survive amid anarchy. The international community cannot ensure such a shift, but we can and should do more to encourage it.

*The writer was secretary of state from 1997 to 2001. She is principal of the [Albright Group LLC](#).*

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