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WHAT IT WILL TAKE TO HEAL U.S. DIPLOMACY.

By Fred Kaplan

Updated Sunday, March 30, 2008, at 10:46 PM ET

With President Bush's approval rating hovering in the 30s, just about everyone has an opinion on what George W. has done wrong in the past seven years. But not everyone can explain what the next president must do to fix it. So we've called in some experts to tell us. **Fixing It** is a 10-part series to be published over the course of this week with contributions from some of our favorite writers, offering detailed policy prescriptions for the next president, whoever that may be, on how to quickly undo some of the damage. One of our contributors wryly describes the series as "News You Can Use. If You Happen To Be President." Read the other entries [here](#).

Fred Kaplan chatted online with readers about this article. Read the transcript.

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Iraq: Use the troops as leverage. Most Democrats realize that total withdrawal in the next few years is impractical. If John McCain is elected, the Joint Chiefs will inform him that his vision of a 100-year occupation is impossible. (If deployments continue at anywhere near current levels, the Army might break before the end of his first term.) The goal should be to withdraw as quickly as possible while trying to keep Iraq from going up in flames. Some believe Iraq's leaders won't get their act together until they see that we really are leaving. Maybe. But it's equally, if not more, plausible that there is no act for them to get together and that the prospect of our departure will drive each faction to retreat and prepare for the imminent civil war. The major parties want us to leave—but not now. One way to exploit this ambivalence: Start the withdrawal but attach benchmarks. (The old benchmarks, which Bush put in place but ignored when they weren't met, might still be suitable.) If the Iraqis meet certain benchmarks, we'll suspend the withdrawal and help consolidate the progress until the next benchmark. If the Iraqis fail to meet them, we will continue the withdrawal. The surge—in fact, our entire military presence—is a means to an end: an instrument to provide security while Iraq's leaders settle their sectarian feuds. If the feuds are irresolvable, we can do only so much; there is little point in keeping our thumbs (and most of our fingers) plugging up holes in the bursting dike. If Iraq were like South Korea or postwar Europe (or even Bosnia), that would be one thing; but no Americans died in combat after those

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wars were over and the long occupations began. That's not the case with Iraq.

- *Prevent Iraq's internal violence from spreading into neighboring countries.* One can imagine Iran intervening to help the Shiites; Saudi Arabia or Egypt or Jordan stepping up to aid the Sunnis; Turkey moving in to crush the Kurds—in short, the civil war morphing into a regionwide conflagration. The next president, working with the United Nations, the Arab League, or whatever entities are suitable, should convene a regional conference. There should be no utopian aspirations. It should be a businesslike office where delegates of the interested nations regularly meet, so that if the violence does begin to spread, there will already be a forum for trying to contain it. This measure would save many days or weeks—which could mean all the difference in the world.

- *In certain neighboring countries ...* In 2006, Condoleezza Rice was asked why she wasn't talking with Syria. She replied, "The Syrians know what they need to do." Maybe, but they didn't know what was in it for them if they did—what they would get for walking away from the Iranians and coming over to our side. Spelling out the trade is what diplomacy is about. Maybe there's nothing we can reasonably offer that they'd accept; but there's no harm in trying.

- *Separately, open up talks with Iran with an eye toward negotiating a "grand bargain."* These talks should cover all issues—including Western capital investment and the end of sanctions in exchange for concessions on enriching uranium and supporting terrorism. This effort may not go anywhere. But Bush's hostile rhetoric has only bolstered Ahmadinejad's domestic support. Diplomatic overtures, if made openly and (by all appearances) sincerely, may undermine his resistance to reform.

- *Work toward new Pakistani alliances.* In Pakistan, the situation is so fluid and uncertain, it's hard to know at this point what policies ought to be pursued 10 months from now. But backing away from Musharraf and moving toward whatever coalition of parties the Pakistani people support (as long as the Taliban or al-Qaida aren't involved) would be a smart move. In these kinds of situations, it's wise to invoke the Realist's slogan: Nations have interests, not friends. (In this case, our hardheaded security interests and our moral aspirations—to create conditions for the survival and, if possible, the spread of democracy—coincide.)

- *Pursue public diplomacy.* What we do sends a more potent signal to the world than the cleverest PR campaign. But once we start doing smarter things, we should also be smart about promoting our efforts. For instance: Revive the U.S. Information Agency—a once-vast independent entity that (through lecture programs, libraries, concerts, etc.) promoted not American policy but American values. Send as emissaries abroad people who understand the language and the area (not well-meaning provincials like Karen Hughes). Expand the Foreign Service. Offer scholarships for intense study in crucial languages. Train customs officers to treat foreign visitors more courteously at embassies and airports. It should be possible to be vigilant about security without assuming that every tourist is a terrorist.

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