

A Challenge for President Bush: Establishing Credibility

Abdul Aziz Said and Nathan C. Funk

In Monday's Army War College address, President Bush sought to reassure the American people that he has a clear strategy for winning the war in Iraq. Although many Americans took comfort in his resolve, it is already clear that Bush's speech did nothing to turn the tide in the battle for hearts and minds. At home and abroad, those who were not already convinced about the righteousness of the Iraq war were discouraged by Bush's comments, not inspired.

But why did the speech lack persuasive power? The answer is simple: President Bush has a credibility problem. Reasonable people do not want America to fail in Iraq, yet it is profoundly unreasonable to expect reflective Americans and Iraqis to accept Bush's words at face value.

Speaking primarily to a domestic audience, President Bush underscored his belief that the war in Iraq is the central front in the war on terrorism. Unveiling no strikingly original proposals other than a plan to demolish the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, Bush adhered to familiar themes and positions.

Because the speech contained no new policy-related content and was offered at a venue in which military discipline precludes protest, it is not unfair to construe it as a campaign event rather than as an act of policy articulation. Americans were left without evidence that Bush's aspirations can be realized, and Iraqis heard nothing that might restore their confidence in a badly mismanaged occupation. Listeners with long memories could not help but hear echoes of "Vietnamization" in Bush's plans for training Iraqis to fight a nationalistically motivated insurgency.

But what else might Bush have said? It is clear that the condition of Iraq today defies simple solutions. An immediate American pullout could give rise to chaos just as surely as a prolonged counter-insurgency campaign. Yet the five steps outlined by Bush are not enough. An additional five-step recovery program is needed:

- 1) To begin restoring his credibility, President Bush must begin using language that respects the moral sentiments and political judgments of other nations. Likening the war in Iraq to the war against the Taliban, for example, is not a convincing rhetorical strategy. Saddam Hussein and Mullah Omar are by no means ideological twins, and it is Bush's rush to war in the face of international opposition that has made Iraq a magnet for new recruits to bin Laden's war. The first line of defense for America against international terrorism is and always has been legitimacy, not the ability to project military power; actions that sever the link between security and legitimacy by flouting international norms ultimately undermine America's ability to protect itself.

- 2) President Bush and other administration officials need to become willing to acknowledge errors and outline believable plans to correct them. The catalog of administration errors in Iraq is remarkably extensive. Sweeping de-Baathification measures and premature dismissal of the Iraqi army provided fuel for the fire of Iraqi rebellion, and inadequate attention to security challenges affecting the civilian population insured that Iraqis' first taste of liberation would be bittersweet. On the economic front, US reconstruction policy has given priority to American corporations rather than to Iraqi laborers; free-trade shock therapy has thrown Iraqis out of work by opening borders to cheap imports. The *casus belli* itself was marred by reliance on deeply flawed and at times deliberately misleading intelligence information, and the Secretary of Defense's cavalier attitude toward the Geneva Conventions is partially responsible for the disaster at Abu Ghraib. Even a grudging acknowledgment of these mistakes would make it easier for the world to support Bush administration policy objectives.
- 3) While acknowledging fallibility, Bush should also demonstrate that the principle of accountability applies to his administration. Electoral calculations should not protect the jobs of officials who failed to prevent torture and who made significant errors in planning the American occupation. The seeming unaccountability of Bush's war cabinet severely undermines international confidence in the President's leadership, crippling America's ability to reach policy objectives.
- 4) Rather than give repeated pep talks to Americans about the war on terrorism, Bush needs to hold more press conferences and answer hard questions directly. Vague promises to bring freedom to Iraqis and defeat Taliban-like forces in the Middle East are unsatisfactory. President Bush and his inner circle have an obligation to level with the American people.
- 5) Finally, Bush must reassure not only Americans, but also Iraqis and broader constituencies of Arabs and Muslims whose partnership we seek in our efforts to achieve international security. At present, these wider constituencies believe that the US is motivated by an imperialistic impulse. Many suspect that the US intends to make Falluja the laboratory for a new Iraq that will be led by military strongmen. To allay these fears, we need to reengage with Iraqis, Arabs, and Muslims in a way that establishes genuine dialogue. We must learn more about the historical experiences that underpin Arab and Muslim discomfort with American power, and find creative ways to build confidence and restore hope. Bush's acknowledgement of Middle Eastern contributions to civilization is a start, but he should go further by citing specific examples of *Arab* and *Islamic* achievements. He should act to catalyze a national dialogue of tribal, political, and religious leaders in Iraq, while also affirming that the US will renew Middle East peace diplomacy if Palestinians hold democratic elections.

By taking these steps, Bush can recover lost credibility and dramatically increase the effectiveness of US policy. It is not too late to exercise genuine leadership by changing course, to secure a better future for Iraqis and Americans alike.

Abdul Aziz Said is a professor of international relations at American University in Washington. Nathan C. Funk is a visiting assistant professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University.