

# In Search of “Plan B”

By Jim Lobe | October 24, 2006

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki has endured recent speculation about how long his tenure in office will last, but it may be U.S. President George W. Bush’s continued reign—at least over Iraq policy—that appears most endangered at the moment.

While no one is talking about a classic *coup d’etat* against the U.S. president, as is being rumored about the increasingly hapless and seemingly helpless Maliki in Baghdad, the administration’s insistence on pursuing what appear to be increasingly unrealistic goals in Iraq is now seen as so delusory as to require some form of serious intervention. “Plan B”—that is, anything but staying the course—has been on the lips of virtually every foreign policy analyst who considers him or herself worthy of the name. The entire capital appears to have decided that whatever the United States has been doing in Iraq for the past three months, six months, or three years is failing, and failing spectacularly.

The somber tone of last week’s military briefings in Iraq certainly reflected that view as various active-duty senior officers finally went public with their growing frustrations. Indeed, the fact that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Peter Pace, earlier this month launched a comprehensive, 60-day review of Iraq strategy belied Bush’s notion that the current strategy is fundamentally sound.

Even a few of the war’s most enthusiastic neoconservative supporters have come to admit that it may in fact have been a serious strategic mistake, although they seem determined to stave off the growing consensus—even among Republican circles—in favor of some kind of timetable for withdrawal.

“The Iraq War was a mistake,” wrote hardline hawk Jonah Goldberg in the *Los Angeles Times* on October 19, suggesting that Iraqis hold a special plebiscite on whether they want the United States to withdraw from their country.

“That the Iraq War is, if not a failure, failing, requires little demonstration,” conceded Eliot Cohen, a member of the Pentagon’s Defense Policy Board, in a column entitled “Plan B” published in the *Wall Street Journal* Friday.

Cohen, whose 2002 book *Supreme Command* (about revered wartime leaders who ignored or overruled their military commanders) received widespread publicity when Bush took it on vacation with him several months before the Iraq invasion, argued in the *Journal* that the loss in “American prestige” resulting from the Iraq adventure is such that it “will not be restored without a considerable and successful use of American military power down the road.”

Not only have some 16,000 U.S. troops in Baghdad failed to stop sectarian bloodletting in the capital itself, but they also have been unable to protect themselves from increasingly potent and sophisticated insurgent and militia attacks.

At some 75 military deaths so far, October 2006 is well on the way to becoming one of the deadliest months for U.S. forces since the invasion more than three years ago. And the sacrifices illustrated by those deaths are increasingly under question here—both among the public at large and the elite—given the growing unanimity among experts that Iraq has reached a state of civil war.

“Almost all the indicators in Iraq point south, and America may already have passed the make-or-break point in its intervention there,” noted an article in the well-respected *National Journal* (“Endgame,” October 20, 2006).

The gloom regarding the situation in Iraq is, of course, compounded not only by the relentless daily media reports cataloguing yet more violence in Iraq, but also by the sense that Bush doesn’t understand how bad the situation has become—or is so stubborn that he wouldn’t admit it if he did.

*State of Denial*, the aptly titled latest book from *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward, recounts a White House meeting late last year with Republican lawmakers during which Bush, a football cheerleader during

▶ **RIGHT WEB** ▶

exposing the architecture of power that's changing our world

---

his university years, tried to quell any doubts about his determination to prevail in Iraq. "I will not withdraw even if [First Lady] Laura and Barney are the only ones supporting me," he told them.

That declaration may have sounded vaguely inspiring to his audience in 2005. But given the blindingly obvious deterioration of the situation in Iraq—and the growing conviction among political pros here that the Republicans will lose control of the House of Representatives and maybe even the Senate in the November 7 midterm elections—it is likely to sound stupid, even suicidal, to the same audience today.

Hence the sudden rise in talk not just about a coup in Baghdad that could somehow produce a new political leadership capable of pacifying Iraq—either through appeasement or ruthless repression (either of the Sunni insurgency or of the Shiite militias)—but about effective "regime change" at home, as well.

Of course, a Democratic sweep in Congress could produce a new political context. Indeed, a growing number of analysts believe that major Republican losses will result at the very least in the long-awaited departure of Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld.

But Rumsfeld's departure alone would guarantee nothing in terms of a change of strategy. And given the Democrats' disunity on Iraq and their relative spinelessness until recently in challenging the basic premises—as opposed to competence—of Bush's foreign policy since 9/11, a number of foreign policy heavyweights, most of them Republican "realists," are suggesting what might be called some serious "adult supervision" of the president after the elections, whether he likes it or not.

Indeed, none other than Harlan Ullman, a defense expert who coined the idea of "shock and awe" in military strategy, noted in his column in the *Washington Times* last week that Bush's stubbornness represented a real obstacle to sensible policies not just in Iraq, but also in East Asia, where North Korea's recent nuclear test has been seen as yet another major Bush failure, and elsewhere.

"Since Mr. Bush is so adamant in his views, perhaps a 'council of elders' could persuade him to reconsider," wrote Ullman, who suggested that Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John Warner (R-VA), former secretaries of state George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, and former Democratic national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski could be involved in a concerted effort to "convince the president to appreciate the possibility that many of our policies are failing or foundering and, unless we take new directions, events in East Asia could follow the disastrous trajectory of what is happening in the greater Middle East."

Such a group, he suggested, should also include former secretary of state James Baker, who now heads the bipartisan, congressionally created Iraq Study Group and has, like Warner, already made clear that "staying the course" is not a viable option.

This refrain is being repeated by a rapidly growing number of panicked Republican incumbents who are distancing themselves from the Bush mantra in hopes of extending their political lives.

---

*Jim Lobe is the Washington bureau chief of the Inter Press Service and a contributing writer to Right Web (rightweb.irc-online.org).*

Published by the Right Web of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

## **The Right Web**

"Exposing the architecture of power that's changing our world"

### Recommended citation:

Jim Lobe, "In Search of 'Plan B'," Right Web Analysis (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, October 24, 2006).

### Web location:

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/rw/3639>

### Production Information:

Writer: Jim Lobe

Editor: Right Web

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC