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June 12, 2006

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Michael G. Vickers *MV*

SUBJECT: Transitioning to an Indirect Approach in Iraq

This memorandum expands upon my earlier memo regarding the transition to an indirect approach in Iraq. It builds on our May 30th discussion in the Oval Office, and seeks to address the questions you raised.

One of the many paradoxes of modern counterinsurgency is that less is often more. This paradox applies to strategy and tactics, to external powers supporting counterinsurgencies, and to internal governments fighting an insurgency. Successful counterinsurgency operations are characterized by an emphasis on intelligence, the discriminate use of force, a focus on building popular support for the government and protecting the population, and on political reconciliation, including amnesty and rehabilitation for insurgents. Police are in the lead, with the military in support. Unsuccessful counterinsurgency efforts are characterized by a military focus on large-scale sweep and kill-capture operations, with forces concentrated in large bases for protection. Building indigenous capacity has been a low priority in unsuccessful operations. Intervention by outside powers in insurgencies in the past half century has been far more successful when an indirect, small footprint approach is used.

Our strategic predicament in Iraq can be summarized as follows: For three years, we have pursued a direct approach to counterinsurgency that has eroded American public support for the war (our center of gravity) more than it has reduced Iraqi support for the insurgency (our enemy's center of gravity). By almost all measures, the insurgency has gotten worse. Insurgent attacks are at historically high levels (3,500 per month), with twice as many attacks occurring daily in May 2006 than in May 2004 and 2005. The security situation in Baghdad has deteriorated. Al Qaeda in Iraq forces and other Sunni insurgents are seriously contesting Ramadi. Insurgent attacks on Iraqis have increased substantially. Independent militias have grown in numbers and influence as a result of intra-Shia power struggles and Sunni-Shia sectarian violence.

Given Iraq's unsettled politics, it is highly unlikely that American forces, even with growing Iraqi security force assistance, will be able to defeat the insurgency within the next 2-3 years. The current level of insurgency, moreover, is likely to be insensitive across a wide range of force levels. The assertion by many critics that more troops in 2003 could have nipped this insurgency in the bud or fundamentally altered its course is not credible. Likewise, increasing the number of U.S. troops now is highly unlikely to be decisive. The insurgents will still control the initiative, and they can always temporarily decline to fight. Insufficient intelligence and continued strong support for the insurgency among the Sunni population will limit the strategic success of any near-term efforts. As



long as the political grievances fueling the insurgency remain, the insurgency will remain.

Because of the direct approach's inability to produce decisive near-term results and its increasing cost, the longer we stay with it, the more we place our long-term goals in Iraq at risk. Continuing with this approach, moreover, does not play to American strengths. The insurgents and the states supporting them (i.e., Iran and Syria) retain the strategic initiative in Iraq, while we suffer from significantly reduced strategic freedom of action.

It is imperative that we accelerate our shift to an indirect approach, with Iraqis in the lead and Americans in support. Transitioning to an indirect approach will require that we begin and continue the drawdown of U.S. forces while the insurgency is still raging. It will require additional resources for Iraqi security forces. Most importantly, we must make our stated "main effort" our actual main effort.

The Iraqi insurgency will not be particularly difficult to defeat over the longer term. It is imperative, however, that we shift the focus from why we seem unable to defeat the insurgency in the short run, to why the new Iraqi government, with our support, will prevail in the long run. The indirect approach has defeated far more formidable insurgencies (i.e., El Salvador in the 1980s) than the one currently being waged in Iraq. The transition to an indirect approach has also been successfully accomplished in the face of much greater insurgent threats and following more dire failure of direct approaches (i.e., by the U.S. in Vietnam after 1971, and by the Soviets in Afghanistan after 1989; the indirect approach failed only when the supporting government collapsed).

Insurgencies are protracted contests of wills. There are no counterinsurgency blitzkriegs. We and the Iraqi government will win in the long run simply by not losing, and by driving the insurgency to lower and lower levels until the insurgents' political will to continue has been broken. We can defeat the insurgency in Iraq the same way we will win the broader Global War on Terrorism: by game-changing, direct operations early in the war (i.e., the overthrow of the Taliban and elimination of the Al Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan), followed by protracted indirect and clandestine operations that leverage the capabilities of our partners. The Iraqi insurgents do not offer a viable political alternative. Unless America abandons Iraq, Iraqi insurgents will remain incapable of massing and conducting large-scale, decisive operations. The Iraqi insurgency will be defeated by increasing Iraqi security and intelligence capabilities, the Iraqi population's eventual rejection of insurgent violence, political reconciliation, and continued American political, military and economic support.

American support, however, must be sustainable across administrations. There is no more important task for the administration than to hand off an Iraq strategy that is sustainable politically by its successors. The strategic imperative is to transition before perceived failure with the direct approach forecloses otherwise viable options. (This was



one of the major mistakes we made in Vietnam.) Our objective should be to hand over primary security responsibility to Iraqi forces no later than summer 2008.

Transitioning to an indirect approach in Iraq is emphatically not an exit strategy. Nor does it mean that we must adjust our goals downward as we hand off security responsibility to Iraqis. It is imperative that we and others not confuse means with ends. Our goals in Iraq should remain our goals. We have long recognized that our goals there cannot be achieved overnight, and that they can only be achieved if the Iraqis take ownership of them.

Zarqawi's death and the formation of the new Iraqi government provide the events on which a transition can begin. This unusual meeting at Camp David provides another potential turning point. The challenge will be to conduct the transition so as to build support among the American people for a sustainable strategy while assuring the new Iraqi government and signaling our enemies that decisive American support will continue. Iraqi security forces have been stood up to 80-85 percent of their targeted levels, and will reach 100 percent by the end of the year. We have killed or captured nearly all former regime elements, and in addition to killing Zarqawi, we have significantly degraded Al Qaeda in Iraq. The insurgency has been successfully contained to Iraq, and it is driven primarily by domestic Iraqi political disputes.

Operations in the near term should focus on eliminating the insurgent sanctuary in Ramadi and on improving the security situation in Baghdad. Substantially reducing the insurgent presence in Ramadi will likely require a combination of clandestine operations by JSOC and the CIA, coupled with direct operations similar to those conducted in Fallujah. Because of sectarian divisions and Sunni rejectionism, U.S. forces will have to take the lead in Ramadi, though as much of an Iraqi face as possible should be put on operations. Because it is the heartland of Sunni rejectionists, Al Anbar is an area ripe for an indirect and clandestine approach over the longer term. Our objective should be to peel off the reconcilable elements of the Sunni insurgency and assist Sunni irregular forces in fighting the irreconcilable elements.

Demonstrated victories are vital to the credibility of the new Iraqi government. It must take the lead in securing Baghdad. We should not, however, create unrealistic expectations about what can be achieved in the near term. Security will stem in large part from political accommodation and reconciliation. We should seek to incorporate rather than disband militias wherever possible. U.S. advisers and material assistance can play an important role in this process.

More broadly, a regional, rather than country-specific approach is imperative. In Central America, we pursued an offensive indirect approach through covert action in Nicaragua – the Sandinistas were providing sanctuary to Salvadoran insurgents and other Central American Marxist groups – in conjunction with our indirect approach to counterinsurgency in the other Central American countries. We should do the same today with regard to Iran and Syria.



Our advisory effort must become the actual, and not just the stated main U.S. effort in Iraq. Support for Iraqi security forces, police as well as army, needs to be increased in several areas: equipment, supplies and secure facilities. They also need responsive operational support. Iraqi security forces must take the lead in planning operations, and not serve as last-minute adjuncts to U.S. operations. As T.E. Lawrence observed, "better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not win it for them." Giving the Iraqis something to defend, moreover, is essential. Economic assistance is as important as security assistance.

We need to send our best personnel as advisors, and they require proper training. We are currently not doing very well in this area. Senior advisory positions (Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel) should be command-equivalent and centrally selected. The same situation applies to personnel from other agencies and departments. Iraqi police will become the main counterinsurgency effort over time. Accordingly, we need to substantially increase our advisory presence with them. (Currently, our effort is heavily weighted toward the Iraqi army.) The overall advisory effort, currently around 5,000 personnel, needs to be doubled.

As part of the transition, we should achieve unity of command and signal our shift to an Iraqi-led approach by putting the U.S. Ambassador in charge of the U.S. effort there. A Special Operations Forces three-star should be selected to head the military assistance command. The current SOF advisory effort in Iraq, with the exception of its support for the Iraqi SOF Brigade, is being constrained by its subordination to conventional forces.

The drawdown of U.S. combat forces, it goes without saying, should occur gradually, and will almost certainly not be completed by the time the administration leaves office. It must begin, however, and it will have to occur while the insurgency is still raging. Significant reductions are feasible and essential, and over the coming two years, the role of remaining U.S. combat forces should shift from a direct combat force to a Quick Reaction Force in support of Iraqi Security Forces. Over time, command of the QRF should be reduced to a two-star position and subordinated to the military assistance effort. A continued clandestine presence (i.e., JSOC) will also be required for some time, and should directly report to the senior military commander.

U.S. combat forces that remain in Iraq after Iraqi forces assume primary security responsibility should be high-leverage, theater-ranging assets: airborne surveillance and strike and air mobility to move rapid reaction ground forces, both U.S. and Iraqi. The entire quick reaction force should not exceed 40,000 troops, about half of which would provide air support. The ground component of the QRF should not be involved in day-to-day counterinsurgency operations.

To politically facilitate the transition, Prime Minister Maliki's goal of accepting security responsibility in 18 months should be supported. A four-star-led assessment team might also be convened to provide recommendations on the transition to an indirect approach.

