

Policy Watch: Republican deadline in Iraq

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The American public's growing unhappiness with the war in Iraq played a large role in the November 2006 elections that resulted in the Democrats retaking control of both the House and the Senate. The lesson for the Republicans is clear: If American forces are still bogged down in Iraq two years from now, the Democrats are highly likely to win the presidential elections as well as strengthen their control over both houses of Congress.

If the Republicans are to have a fighting chance of keeping the presidency and retaking control of the closely divided Senate (their retaking the House will be much more difficult), American forces have to be out of Iraq or clearly on the way out -- whether or not "victory" has been achieved. And it seems highly unlikely that America can achieve that victory.

The Republicans now have two choices. One is to announce and begin the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq sufficiently in advance of the 2008 elections in order to have a chance to retain the White House and possibly retake the Senate. The disadvantage of this strategy is that while it might work for the 2008 elections, if conditions then deteriorate in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East -- as they are highly likely to do -- the American public might later blame the Republicans both for getting America into Iraq and for the consequences of getting out of it.

The second strategy is to "stay the course," see the Democrats add control of the White House to their control of Congress in 2008, and let the Democrats preside over the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq. The Republicans can then blame the Democrats' withdrawal of American forces from Iraq for the deteriorating circumstances in Iraq and the Middle East that arise afterward.

This is undoubtedly a cynical strategy. It is also a risky one: Instead of blaming the Democrats for the deterioration of conditions in the Middle East following a withdrawal from Iraq that they presided over, the American public might blame the Republicans for this state of affairs since they were the ones that got the United States into Iraq in the first place. The Democrats will energetically encourage this point of view.

This second strategy, though, may be the one that Republicans are stuck with since President Bush has repeatedly stated that American forces will not leave Iraq until victory has been achieved. He may yet change course, but so far he seems determined to pursue victory in Iraq no matter how unfeasible this now is or what the political cost to the Republicans will be.

If this is the position that President Bush sticks to, then the only hope for other Republican politicians may be to steal the Democrats' thunder by repudiating him themselves and nominating a Republican presidential candidate who promises to withdraw American forces from Iraq. Obviously, this is not something Republican politicians will want to do. But if it comes down to a choice between sticking with President Bush on the one hand and electoral victory in 2008 on the other, the latter option will undoubtedly prove more appealing. Indeed, Republican politicians can blame President Bush for forcing them to make this choice.

As the 2006 elections showed, claiming that America is achieving victory in Iraq when it clearly is not will be a recipe for failure in the 2008 elections. The Republicans don't have all that long

to come up with a recipe either.

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