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Time to pull out. And not just from Iraq.

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CAMBRIDGE, Massachusetts American foreign policy should be guided by two general principles: The first is advancing our security and political interests; the second is encouraging prosperity and responsive government for all people.

It may be that with our encouragement and example, many countries will choose to adopt democracy and a market economy, presumably adapted to their own culture. Of course, others will follow a very different road for some time, perhaps indefinitely, as ethnic differences, poverty and historical and religious traditions affect and constrain choices.

America embarks on an especially perilous course, however, when it actively attempts to establish a government based on our values in another part of the world. It is one matter to adopt a foreign policy that encourages democratic values; it is quite another to believe it just or practical to achieve such results on the ground with military forces. This is true whether we are acting alone, as is largely the case in Iraq, or as part of an international coalition.

It seems that many in the Bush administration believed that an invasion to topple Saddam Hussein would result in a near spontaneous conversion of Iraq, and with luck much of the Middle East, to democracy. But the notion of intervening in foreign countries to build a society of our preference is not just a Republican or conservative failing.

The corresponding Democratic or liberal failing is the view that America has a duty to intervene in foreign countries that egregiously violate human rights and a responsibility to oppose and, where possible, remove totalitarian heads of state. This Democratic rhetoric quickly moves from "peacekeeping" in a country torn by strife to "peacemaking" and to "nation-building."

The Clinton administration's intervention in Bosnia in the mid-1990s is an example of just such a failing: moving from an initial, laudable objective of stopping the Serbian "ethnic cleansing" of Bosnians to a fantastical goal of creating a "multiethnic" society with peaceful coexistence among three groups - Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs - that have a history of enmity.

We should not shirk from quick military action for the purpose of saving lives that are in immediate danger.

For example, the decision not to intervene early to prevent mass murder in Rwanda was a major failure. But we should not be lured into intervention that has as its driving purpose the replacement of despotic regimes with systems of government more like our own. It is not that the purpose is unworthy, but rather that it is unlikely to succeed.

Moreover, in trying to achieve regime change or nation-building, we tend to rely on military force rather than diplomacy, trade and economic assistance. The American military, the best in the world, is built to fight and win wars; we can ask the Marine Corps to defeat Republican Guard divisions or destroy rebel

strongholds in Falluja, but maintaining local security, brokering political alliances and running local water systems, hospitals, power plants and schools are not major parts of its mission or training.

Reshaping our military to take on the activities that the Pentagon euphemistically calls "stability and security" operations will come at a cost - both in terms of potentially compromising the war-fighting capacity of our troops and in diverting the resources needed to support the civic action that underlies nation-building. If we want to influence the behavior of nations, we would be better served by combining diplomacy with our considerable economic strength.

Even North Korea saw the advantages, for a period of time, of constraining (albeit selectively and temporarily) its nuclear weapons activities for the economic benefits that accompanied the "agreed framework" of 1994.

More recently, Libya backed off its secret pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, apparently on the sole expectation of economic benefit. The demise of the apartheid regime in South Africa after an embargo showed what sometimes can be done by collective economic action.

So where does that leave us on Iraq?

There is a widespread view, even among who opposed the invasion, that we have a responsibility to keep our troops in place until certain minimum conditions are achieved: some degree of security for the Iraqi people; a reasonable start on stable and representative self-government; and partial reconstruction of the civilian infrastructure.

Prompt withdrawal is considered unthinkable by most Republicans and Democrats, because it is difficult to envision a pullout that leaves a peaceful Iraq in its wake and doesn't invite further unrest in the region.

So the expectation is that we will be in Iraq for several more years, perhaps with a somewhat reduced presence, but spending considerable money (more than $1 billion per week) and sacrificing lives (one dozen to two dozen deaths and serious casualties per week), while working to achieve those minimum objectives required for withdrawal.

This conventional view, however, ignores two important questions.

The first is, how much are American interests in the Arab world being harmed by our continued presence in Iraq? Second, how much does the U.S. presence in Iraq reduce our ability to deal with other important security challenges, notably those posed by North Korea, Iran and international terrorism?

Those who argue that we should "stay the course" because an early withdrawal from Iraq would hurt America's global credibility must consider the possibility that we will fail in our objectives in Iraq and suffer an even worse loss of credibility down the road.

I do not believe that we are making progress on any of our key objectives in Iraq. There may be days when security seems somewhat improved or when the Iraqi government appears to be functioning better, but the underlying destabilizing effect of the insurgency is undiminished.

When, after the fall of Baghdad, the decision was taken to disband the Iraqi Army, an impossible security situation was created: a combination of hostile ethnic factions supported by demobilized, but armed, military and security units with surrounding nations actively supporting them.

The insurgency cannot be overcome easily by either U.S. military forces or immature Iraqi security forces. Nor would the situation be eased even if, improbably, the United Nations, NATO, our European allies and Japan choose to become seriously involved.

Our best strategy now is a prompt withdrawal plan consisting of clearly defined political, military and economic elements.

Politically, the United States should declare its intention to remove its troops and urge the Iraqi government and its neighbors to recognize the common regional interest in allowing Iraq to evolve peacefully and without external intervention. The first Iraqi election under the permanent constitution, planned for Dec. 15, is an appropriate date for beginning the pullout.

Militarily, we should establish a timetable for reducing the scope of operations that has enough flexibility so as not to provide a tactical advantage to insurgents. We should also plan on continuing measures like

no-flight zones, border surveillance, training for Iraqi security forces, intelligence collection and maintenance of a regional quick-reaction force.

Economically, we should define what amount of assistance we are prepared to extend to Iraq as long as it stays on a peaceful path. It would be best if this aid was but one facet of a broader set of economic initiatives to benefit Arab states that advance our interests.

Of course, these measures cannot guarantee a secure and democratic Iraq free of external domination. But they could be first steps of a strategy to pursue America's true long-term interests in the Middle East and the Gulf.