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MAINE VOICES

Time to correct U.S. course in Iraq

● President Bush is still trying to have it all his own way.

By TOM ALLEN

A year ago, I wrote in the Portland Press Herald that before we took on war in Iraq, Americans had to ask, "What price will we pay? Will it be worth it?"

I worried about "the risk of making matters worse," and that the "human and financial cost may be extremely high." I noted that "our allies appear to have no stomach for an invasion," that we might "foot the whole bill," and that there was no guarantee we could "replace the current regime with a viable alternative that will bring stability and peace to the region."

I hoped my grim predictions were wrong. Our armed forces have performed with the utmost skill and bravery, deserving our gratitude and support. However, we have learned that assumptions about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction were false.

LAST WEEK, President Bush finally admitted that the United States has no evidence linking Saddam to the 9/11 attacks, despite the administration's constant rhetoric linking al-Qaida-led terrorism and Saddam.

Plans for rebuilding Iraq were woefully inadequate, and cost estimates absurdly low. Repeated assertions that Iraqi oil would fund reconstruction ignored aging infrastructure and sabotage. Rather than catalyzing Mideast peace, the region is again awash in violence. Our arrogant dismissal of our allies' concerns has made it all the more difficult to win their financial and military support for post-war efforts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Where do we go from here? The president requested an \$87 billion emergency appropriation for the war and reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan (where terrorism is again rising).

This figure's enormity is hard to grasp. It is \$8 billion more than the combined budget shortfalls next year of all 50 states. It would provide \$3.8 million per congressional district every week for a year.

YET, I BELIEVE we must not turn our backs on our troops and our commitments. Our military, including overburdened reservists, are stretched thin and remain vulnerable to deadly attacks. There are inspiring stories of cooperation and hopeful progress on the ground.

Nevertheless, many Iraqis still live without electricity, running water, and rudimentary health care. Violence and unemployment threaten lasting peace and security. We have an obligation to restore Iraq's economic and political stability, both because that is what we promised, and because with its oil wealth, Iraq could become a more dangerous haven for global terrorism than Afghanistan under the Taliban.

How can we afford these obligations? First, we must secure international support for the long, costly, risky occupation and reconstruction of Iraq. That means sharing decision-making on key missions.

Assistance from the United Nations and our allies will not only

ease our burden, but also provide multilateral legitimacy to help counter resentment directed at Americans in Iraq and elsewhere.

President Bush's Tuesday U.N. address failed to offer a clear, compelling case for that support so vital to successful Iraq reconstruction and to relief for American taxpayers. We must show our allies that we have realistic plans for Iraq and have learned from our mistakes.

Second, to fund our Iraq commitments, we should freeze previous tax cuts for taxpayers earning over \$350,000 a year. Generous tax cuts for the wealthy have done little to spur our economy, but much to distort our priorities.

While I approve the president's promises of schools, health care and infrastructure repairs for the Iraqi people, many here at home are rightfully beginning to ask: Why can't the president deliver on these same goals for the American people?

Finally, we must empower Iraqis to take control of their destiny. We must foster an Iraqi government with real responsibilities. We must retrain troops from among the more than 1 million Iraqi soldiers, whom we first summarily fired and then put on unemployment checks, to assume peace-keeping functions.

WE HAVE reached a critical juncture in our nation's history. Iraq must not fall into the chaos that again threatens Afghanistan. We must honor our commitments to both countries. But we should also honor our nation's highest ideals, by supporting our service members and their families, keeping our promises to veterans, and investing in good schools, job security and health care.

It is time to correct course.

— Special to the Press Herald