

Bush reaffirms end to U.S. occupation of Iraq

Some officials say the projected June 30 transfer of power is 'a gamble'

By Jonathan S. Landay
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON — With a speech on Monday at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pa., President Bush is scheduled to kick off an intensified drive to reassure Iraqis, Americans and the rest of the world that the occupation will end despite the presence of more than 100,000 U.S. soldiers and a 1,000-strong U.S. embassy.

Bush's chances for success in Iraq, and perhaps also in the November presidential election, hinge on whether Iraqis accept the interim government that is to replace the U.S.-led occupation on July 1, U.S. officials and experts agree.

"We'll have an active role. But the truth of the matter is, Iraq will be run by Iraqi citizens," Bush said in a May 18 interview with the Iraqi newspaper Al-Zaman.

An interim government that is seen by most Iraqis to be making its

own decisions, not taking orders from Washington, would have a chance to draft a democratic constitution and guide the country to parliamentary elections by early 2005, the officials and experts said.

Continued political chaos, mounting casualties and growing costs in Iraq, however, could erode public, congressional and international support for U.S. policy and spark growing calls for an American withdrawal.

"The United States ... is gambling regardless of what it does; if a prolonged military presence threatens to delegitimize the new Iraqi government, a premature and abrupt withdrawal could create a security vacuum encouraging disorder, even civil war," warns a new study published by the Strategic Studies Institute at the War College, where Bush is to appear Monday.

The report compared the U.S. wars in Vietnam and Iraq and found that "the differences greatly outnumbered the similarities."

Nevertheless, it said, Vietnam holds important lessons for Bush

because the United States faces a dilemma in Iraq similar to the one it faced in South Vietnam 40 years ago. No local government is likely to survive without massive American military support, but that support undermines the government's legitimacy.

"In Iraq, as in South Vietnam, political success will require creation of (1) a government regarded as legitimate by the great majority of the country's inhabitants, and (2) security forces capable of protecting the new political order," the study said.

"In Iraq, the United States is starting from scratch because no real national government and only fledgling security forces exist. Moreover, any government the United States fosters in Iraq will be tainted in the eyes of many Iraqis by virtue of its American association, especially if the security situation continues to require a large and highly visible U.S. military presence."

As that has dawned on more officials in recent months, the administration has begun trying to lower the

American profile in Iraq.

The administration's latest course change in Iraq began last month, when it agreed that United Nations envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, in consultation with Washington and leading Iraqis, should select the members of the interim government.

Brahimi is expected to announce his choices for a president, two vice presidents, a prime minister and 26 cabinet members by the end of the month.

This month, Secretary of State Colin Powell said the United States would pull its 135,000 troops out of Iraq if the interim government asked it to, although he added that he thought there was little chance such a demand would be made.

Another critical component of Bush's transition strategy is a new U.N. resolution that administration officials hope will help dispel the widely held belief in Iraq and the Arab world that the interim government will be another U.S. tool.

The resolution, which is the subject of furious debate in the U.N. Security Council, would declare an end to the 15-month U.S.-led

occupation, proclaim the restoration of Iraqi sovereignty and give international recognition to the interim government.

It also will "make it clear that Iraqi assets, particularly oil assets, belong to Iraqis and would be managed by them," Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 18.

The critical status of U.S. troops after June 30, and how much authority the interim government will have over its own security forces, remains unsettled, however.

Armitage told the Senate committee that an American general would retain overall command, but that Iraqi forces will be able to "opt out" of military operations if they choose not to participate.

Many experts, however, doubt that the new Iraqi army and other security forces being trained by the United States and other countries will be able to take over any time soon.

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Arab leaders promise more free, democratic societies

Iraqi sovereignty was a main topic of discussion at this weekend's summit in Tunisia

By Michael Matza
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

TUNIS, Tunisia — Responding to internal and external pressures to open up their governments to popular participation, Arab leaders concluded a two-day summit Sunday by promising a larger role for private citizens in public affairs, support for women's rights and expansion of civil society.

"Our states are committed to values of human rights ... reinforcing freedom of expression and the independence of the judiciary," Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa said, reading from the summit's closing statement.

Recognizing that the Arab League's 22 members are not uniformly ready for change, the statement said the countries would implement initiatives "according to their own terms of

reference," meaning at their own pace and in keeping with local traditions and customs.

The summit also expressed support for returning sovereignty to the Iraqi people as soon as possible. It said the United Nations should have "a central and effective role ... in order to end the (U.S.-led military occupation) and arrange the stages of transferring sovereignty to the Iraqi people."

The delegates condemned "the inhumane and unethical crimes and practices committed by troops of the occupation forces."

Delegates had been expected to hit out more harshly against the United States for the prisoner-abuse scandal, but most realized "it was an incident, not a policy," said a senior Egyptian delegate.

For its part, the summit pledged "to fight terrorism in all its forms while making a distinction between terrorists and people who have a legitimate right to fight occupation."

Yet the principal achievement of the weekend was plain and simple, several participants said: For the first time in the League's 59-year history, it pledged to actually implement what it resolves.

Leaders agreed to a document titled "Pledge of Accord and Solidarity," which commits them to implementing Arab League decisions "to guarantee a better future for the Arab countries and their peoples and to avoid the ordeals of sedition, division and infighting."

"We ... undertake to work together to take decisions which fulfill these targets," Moussa said.

The development was revolutionary for a body widely viewed as ineffective and lacking enforcement mechanisms.

"It increases the challenges and the urgency to do something about them," said Palestinian Authority foreign minister Nabil Shaath.

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FIRECRACKER

continued from page 4

public offering to the boundlessness of his creativity.

"That is one of my messages for any student, or young aspiring filmmaker anywhere, is: You can do it anywhere, especially nowadays," said Balderson. "It's been kind of exciting that I can stay in Kansas and make these movies. You don't have to go to L.A."

Luna admires Balderson's technique; in fact, his unique methods are one reason she holds Balderson in high regard professionally.

"Steve is hands-down one of the best directorial experiences I have ever had," she said.

Although "Firecracker" isn't coming out until later this year, the behind-the-scenes documentary gives fans an overview of the kind of ubiquitous determination the Baldersons and company shouldered for the duration of the project.

Pop culture has welcomed with open arms the trend of behind-the-scenes and real-life stories — the success of shows such as VH1's "Behind the Music" and E!'s "True Hollywood Story" are testimony to this popularity. Oftentimes, though, many stories told in such a fashion are rarely as

interesting to the public as the creators hope, and the behind-the-scenes tales fail to heighten the project's public appeal. "Wamego" lies in no danger of this fate. While parts of the documentary are somewhat dry, Balderson pulls no punches in telling even the gristliest details of the film's making.

"I really wanted to show how much blood and sweat really do play a part in this, and how much you do have to do it," said Balderson. To him, it's all about dedication — and dedication has risen again with the work of Balderson; it is present and accounted for, twinkling bright amid the bleak laziness of commercial expectation.

"If I can inspire at least one person to continue with their dream and just do something, then that is just awesome," said Balderson. "The best part is, if you work really hard, and put yourself up to the challenge, anything can happen."

"Wamego: Making Movies Anywhere" will be available June 18 through Dikenga's Web site. The site for the movie is <http://www.dikenga.com/films/firecracker>. The Dikenga home page is <http://www.dikenga.com>.

Contact the copy chief at rebekahhearn@dailymerald.com. Her opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

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