

COMMENTARY

Wednesday, May 26, 2004

EDITORIAL

Plan for Iraq must have extensive definition

Addressing an audience at Carlisle Barracks — home to the war college — Monday night, President Bush spoke for a half-hour about the war in Iraq. Offering somewhat more definition than his administration had in the past, Bush outlined five general steps for establishing a sovereign Iraqi state: A transition of power, rebuilding infrastructure, improving security, working toward a national election and encouraging international support of efforts in the nation.

And despite recent troubles in the embattled nation — the 138,000 troops in Iraq now comprise a somewhat larger force than the 115,000 that were anticipated to be needed by this point in the conflict — Bush remained generally optimistic.

"Despite past disagreements, most nations have indicated strong support for the success of a free Iraq," he explained, "and I am confident they will share that success."

Bush clarified and more specifically defined what the interim government will be, including a prime minister, a president, two vice-presidents and a few dozen Cabinet ministers. Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Tony Blair suggested that the new Iraqi government's decisions might trump the Coalition's desires, if the issue arises.

"If there's a political decision as to whether you go into a place like Fallujah in a particular way, that has to be done with the consent of the Iraqi government," he said.

Although the Emerald Editorial Board recognizes that Bush's speech was short and didn't address many of the even broader issues at hand, more definition in the mission is needed for the sake of building confidence in reconstructing Iraq — on the parts of Americans, the world community and, most importantly, Iraqis.

Sen. Joe Biden, D-Del., the ranking Dem on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, noted, "He didn't say who's going to send more troops," conceding that Bush might address that point in an upcoming speech (Monday's speech was the first of six scheduled between this week and the June 30 handover of power in Iraq. Biden also said Bush should explain how some 35,000 Iraqi soldiers will be trained, too.)

League of Arab States Ambassador Yahya Mahmassani was more pessimistic, telling CNN, "(Bush's speech was) essentially the same statement we have heard before, except now actually he gives a general outline. ... I think essentially the situation in Iraq is getting from bad to worse."

Even this general plan still evidently needs adjustments: Speaking on Tuesday, Bush and French President Jacques Chirac agreed the outline needs some changes to win U.N. Security Council support. Meanwhile, Russia wants more details of the interim government plan worked out.

So, the Bush administration should maintain an open dialogue with its foreign counterparts for the good of the Iraqi people and international stability alike.

EDITORIAL POLICY

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Eric Layton Illustration

Bring the WAL down

Wal-Mart is not just another company. It is the largest corporation in the world and everything it does sends shudders through the economy, affecting market behavior and the practices of its competitors.

A year ago, I told you about Wal-Mart's censorship. I told you about the company's forcing its employees to work unpaid overtime. My column mentioned Wal-Mart's low wages and alleged use of pressure tactics to prevent the formation of labor unions. I told you about the accusations of sex discrimination and I urged you to shop at more socially responsible businesses.

In the year since, the bad news about Wal-Mart has continued to rain down. Details have emerged of Wal-Mart workers routinely laboring through their breaks in violation of state labor laws.

An internal audit found numerous violations of child labor laws that limit how many hours minors can work and when, *The New York Times* reported. Wal-Mart responded to these findings not by striving to improve its labor record but by eliminating the time-clock records that provided the only paper trail of its violations.

Wal-Mart also came under fire in October for employing illegal immigrants. Federal agents raided 60 Wal-Marts on Oct. 23 and arrested more than 250 janitors whom the government believed were in the country illegally.

Just two weeks ago, Wal-Mart settled an environmental case brought by federal agencies for \$3.1 million. The company paid the record amount for violations of the Clean Water Act caused by excessive stormwater runoff.

When grocery store workers went on strike in California this past year, the grocery chains used the looming threat of competition from non-union Wal-Mart stores to push for labor concessions.

Now, Wal-Mart wants a bigger piece of Eugene. The company has applied to expand its store on West 11th Avenue to 217,000 square feet.

At a Eugene City Council work session Monday, several councilors expressed reservations about the prospect of the city



Chuck Slothower
Taking issue

playing host to a larger Wal-Mart.

"The current application ... will have negative consequences on the transportation infrastructure and the wetlands," Councilor Betty Taylor said. Taylor displayed strong opposition to Wal-Mart's plans at the meeting, going so far as to propose a moratorium on applications for retail space exceeding 50,000 square feet.

Councilor David Kelly, whose district includes the neighborhoods around the University, said Wal-Mart's plans struck him as an economic development issue. Kelly said the kind of "low-wage and low-benefit jobs" that Wal-Mart offers may end up costing taxpayers money by creating a gap between those workers' wages and real-life costs that government ends up paying for through welfare and government-subsidized medical aid.

Councilors Bonny Bettman and Scott Meisner — after a switched vote by Meisner — joined Kelly and Taylor in supporting a motion for a moratorium. The effort was shot down, however, by opposition from Mayor Jim Torrey and a bloc of conservative councilors.

One of those councilors, Jennifer Solomon, cited Wal-Mart's low prices as her reason for supporting the expansion. Admittedly, Wal-Mart offers the cheapest prices. But at what point do social concerns outweigh saving a buck?

Wal-Mart poses a classic example of the excesses of capitalism. Though capitalism is by far the best economic system tried yet, it has flaws.

Sensible regulation can partially correct those imperfections. Regulating Wal-Mart extends the industrial regulation in place

since the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to child labor, unsafe work environments and tainted food, water and drugs.

Any city council effort to oppose Wal-Mart faces the difficult task of preventing undesirable developments while allowing desirable ones. The council can't legislate against Wal-Mart by name because of legal obstacles, so it's left with crafting a difficult definition of what constitutes a "big box" supercenter.

One proposal, a blanket prohibition on any retail development or expansion of more than 50,000 square feet, could ensnare plans for a new Home Depot on West 11th Avenue and expansion of other stores in Eugene, said Tom Coyle, executive director of the city's planning and development department. While the proposal may have its merits, it would clearly affect more than just Wal-Mart.

Some councilors said it's too late to turn Eugene into an anti-big box oasis. As Kelly noted, however, "The horse may be out of the barn but preventing more of it happening is valuable as well."

It may be too late to stop the Wal-Mart expansion under consideration, but by passing an ordinance, the council can limit Wal-Mart or its competitors from building more supercenters.

Perhaps a 100,000-square-foot ceiling would prove more workable. As an editorial in *The Sunday Register-Guard* noted, this would have the effect of giving Wal-Mart a local superstore monopoly.

Yet a superstore isn't a true monopoly because it doesn't offer products or services unavailable elsewhere. A Eugene resident could get a haircut at Wal-Mart or at myriad of local businesses.

Any effort to stop Wal-Mart from growing in Eugene constitutes a noble action. Let's hope our city councilors are crafty enough to figure out a workable solution that a majority of councilors can tolerate.

Contact the columnist at chuckslothower@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.