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IRAQ: It's Time to Start Dealing with Reality

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It's time to stop being coy with language. It's time to stop inventing new definitions for words everyone already understands. It is time to speak plainly.

One: We have not brought democracy to Iraq; we have brought chaos.

Violence between Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish factions is a daily, deadly occurrence. Suicide bombings have become routine, killing scores of civilians at a time. Insurgents have become increasingly efficient at designing, building, planting and exploding roadside bombs that kill American soldiers almost at will. Outside Baghdad's heavily defended Green Zone, as Dexter Filkins of The New York Times reported on Sunday, the city is largely a killing zone dotted with fortified private compounds.

The administration predicted that violence would subside after the United States captured Saddam, after the United States transferred sovereignty to an interim Iraqi government and after Iraqis voted in an open election. It has intensified. There is no reason to believe a constitution, if and when the country's bitter rivals cobble one together, will change this pattern.

Corruption is rampant. An internal Iraqi audit, reported last week by Knight-Ridder, indicated that virtually half of the Defense Ministry's \$1.3 billion budget for 2005 "has disappeared." The Iraqi Defense Ministry is responsible for the Iraqi army, which will be responsible for the country's security after American forces leave.

Meanwhile, most of the American money allotted for reconstruction remains unspent, and projects hang suspended because it's too dangerous for contractors to complete them. Even so, ever resourceful U.S. service members continue to brave danger and defy the odds to try to build things to improve the ordinary lives of ordinary Iraqis. The bigger picture, however, leaves the people of Baghdad with less electrical service today than they had before American forces invaded more than two years ago. So violence confines people to their homes, which aren't air conditioned in the 100-plus-degree summer because violence makes it impossible to rebuild, run and maintain the electrical system.

Members of some Iraqi police paramilitary units, on the other hand, are enjoying success with American help. In November 2003, according to classified documents obtained by the Washington Post, CIA-sponsored Iraqi paramilitaries code-named the Scorpions teamed with a CIA operative and Army interrogators over a period of days to beat to death an Iraqi general in their custody at an Iraqi desert outpost.

Last month, police paramilitaries seized 13 Sunni men and teenagers from a hospital emergency room in Baghdad, threw them into a metal police van in 110-degree heat and left them there for 12 hours. Ten died of suffocation, The New York Times reported.

Saad Sultan, an official with Iraq's Human Rights Ministry, told the Los Angeles Times that his country's police and security forces are routinely abusing their own prisoners. "There are beatings, punching, electric shocks to the body, including sensitive areas, hanging prisoners upside-down . . .," Sultan told the newspaper. "Most of (the police) worked during Saddam's regime."

Americans certainly didn't have to teach torture to veterans of Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship; we just taught them it was still OK.

Two: The U.S. government is not supporting our troops in Iraq; it is sacrificing them.

National Guard and reserve units have carried far more responsibility in the Iraq war than in past conflicts, yet they were sent into battle with second-rate equipment compared to that of regular Army units. Not coincidentally, a USA Today analysis of Pentagon statistics last year found that Army National Guard troops were 35 percent more likely to be killed in Iraq than regular Army soldiers. This month is already the deadliest yet for National Guard and reserve forces, and there are 14 days left.

Troops complained for more than a year about inadequate armor on trucks and Humvees and got a lot of talk and little action from the Pentagon. Only when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was publicly embarrassed by a question last December from a soldier in harm's way did the pace of change accelerate. This week, The New York Times reported a similar story of logistical bottlenecks that, for the last year, has left our soldiers lacking the higher quality body armor they need for protection from insurgent gunfire.

Much more fundamentally, the administration started its war without a coherent plan for controlling and managing Iraq after Saddam was overthrown. This failure by U.S. policymakers created a situation far more chaotic and lethal than it needed to be; American fighting men and women have been paying with their lives and limbs ever since.

Three: Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the United States has subjected prisoners to cruel and inhumane treatment, including torture, when deemed necessary - and sometimes when not deemed necessary.

A nearly four-year-long paper trail of legal memos by White House, Justice Department and Department of Defense officials and an assortment of public statements, court filings and testimony establish the Bush administration's determination to pursue such a path - rhetorical winks, nods and nudges notwithstanding.

The instruments of these tactics have included military police, military interrogators, Special Operations personnel, CIA operatives, private contractors for the United States and the intelligence/security forces of other countries. The practices began in Afghanistan, moved to the U.S. prison facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and then boomeranged back overseas to Iraq. Even the severely limited self-investigations by U.S. military authorities have confirmed more than two dozen deaths of prisoners in American custody from 2002 through 2004 by shooting, strangulation, suffocation, blunt-force trauma and other killing methods.

Given the established record of prisoner abuses, the Bush administration's official denials that such conduct is systematic amount to farce. For the administration's claims to be credible, the FBI agents who wrote internal memos and e-mails about what they witnessed at Guantanamo would have to be wrong. The soldiers who have testified about what they saw and, in some cases, did in Iraq and Afghanistan would have to be wrong. The International Red Cross would have to be wrong. Former Army interrogator/translator Erik Saar, who wrote a book about his Guantanamo experiences, would have to be wrong. Former prisoners - including those with no terrorist connections - would have to be wrong.

Far more telling than the administration's pro forma protestations of innocence is its fierce opposition to a modest bill by Republican senators Lindsey Graham of South Carolina (a former military lawyer) and John McCain of Arizona (a former prisoner of war who was tortured in North Vietnam). The Graham-McCain measure would ban "cruel, inhuman or degrading" treatment of prisoners; the Bush administration is working at the highest levels to block it.

Maybe this is the way things have to be. Maybe protecting America from international terrorism requires acts of sovereign aggression, no limits on the projection of military power and tactics that violate the rules of civilized nations.

But we cannot discuss morality, ethics, principle, pragmatism, necessity and naivete until we first recognize reality.