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Former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird

Pay heed to these insights

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"We owe it to the restive people back home to let them know there is an exit strategy and, more important, we owe it to the Iraqi people."

Melvin Laird

Melvin Laird has a unique perspective on the U.S. engagement in Iraq.

Not surprisingly, the man who was secretary of defense in the Nixon administration and the architect of the policy that managed the extraction of American forces from the seemingly endless war in Vietnam has his own view of the current struggle.

In a lengthy essay in the forthcoming issue of Foreign Affairs magazine, Laird offers an analysis of the parallels and differences between Iraq and Vietnam that challenges the thinking of both President Bush and the critics of administration policy.

By speaking out publicly for the first time on the subject, the longtime Republican leader — who served 16 years in Congress before going to the Pentagon for four years in 1969 and to the White House staff for the final year of Nixon's presidency — has done another service to his country.

Laird does not concede, even now, that Vietnam had to fall to the communists, blaming the loss directly on the Democratic Congress and indirectly on the Ford administration for acquiescing in the cutoff of aid to the Saigon regime.

Nor does he consider democracy in Iraq a lost cause. Far from it. However false the original premise of the war, the fight against terrorism is one that must be won, he says. But speaking from experience, he argues two points that call for a change in emphasis, if not direction, in American policy, and a third that would require Bush to execute a complete about-face.

Noting that the U.S. effort in Vietnam was undercut by its eagerness to install "a real puppet government" in Saigon, made up of "selfish men who were no more than dictators in the garb of statesmen," he argues that in Iraq, "a legitimate government, not window-dressing, must be the primary goal."

To the extent that the United States is seen as manipulating both the writing and the ratification of the new Iraqi constitution — that advice has been ignored.

Second, Laird argues that the United States should "not let too many more weeks pass" before beginning to withdraw troops from Iraq and turning over the security of the country to Iraqi forces.

When he took over the Pentagon, Laird said, he changed the mission statement "from one of applying maximum pressure against the enemy to one of giving maximum assistance to South Vietnam to fight its own battles."

That should have been U.S. policy in Iraq "even before the first shot was fired." It ought to begin now and continue indefinitely, with the pace to be restrained only by the judgment of American military commanders on the capabilities of Iraqis to fill the security role.

"We owe it to the restive people back home to let them know there is an exit strategy and, more important, we owe it to the Iraqi people," Laird says. "Our presence is what feeds the insurgency, and our gradual withdrawal would feed the confidence and the ability of average Iraqis to stand up to the insurgency."

White House officials would maintain they are doing their best to establish a legitimate government in Iraq and to boost the fighting capacity of Iraqi forces.

But on Laird's third point, they cannot pretend to be in accord.

The former defense secretary, himself a veteran of World War II, has harsh words to say about abuse of prisoners in American hands.

"To stop abuses and mistakes by the rank and file, whether in the prisons or on the streets, heads must roll at much higher levels than they have thus far," he says.

"To me, the alleged prison scandals reported to have occurred in Iraq, in Afghanistan and at Guantanamo Bay have been a disturbing reminder of the mistreatment of our own POWs by North Vietnam. The conditions in our current prison camps are nowhere near as horrific as they were at the 'Hanoi Hilton,' but that is no reason to pat ourselves on the back. The minute we begin to deport prisoners to other nations where they can be legally tortured, when we hold people without charges or trial, when we move prisoners around to avoid the prying inspections of the Red Cross, when prisoners die inexplicably on our watch, we are on a slippery slope toward the inhumanity that we deplore."

Those are powerful words from a powerful source. One can only hope they are heeded.