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Yes, We Can Find the Exit
by Thomas L. Friedman

MOSCOW -- Listening, from Moscow, to the debate in Congress about Iraq is troubling: it sounds as if the American people are being offered two routes to a dead end: either follow President Bush and have troops surging into a roiling civil war, or go with one of the Congressional resolutions and denounce the surge, but without any alternative strategy for securing U.S. interests.

I believe there is an alternative strategy, but it will take two concrete numbers to implement: a date - Dec. 1 - and a price - \$3.50 cents a gallon. Let me explain.

What is the U.S. interest in Iraq right now? It's to quell the civil war enough so the parties may eventually reach a negotiated settlement, and if that proves impossible, to get America out of Iraq with the least damage to our interests.

We will not quell this civil war with a surge of troops alone. The only thing that will do that is a power-sharing, oil-revenue-sharing deal between the parties. The only way we will get serious negotiations going is with leverage that America does not now have: leverage on the parties inside and outside Iraq. Negotiating in the Middle East without leverage is futile. These folks know how to calculate the balance of power down to the last ounce.

So how do we get leverage? The first way to do that is by setting a firm date to leave - Dec. 1. All U.S. military forces are either going to be home for Christmas 2007 or redeployed along the borders of Iraq, away from the civil war.

Right now everyone in Iraq is having their cake and eating it - at our expense. We have to change that.

The Sunnis, who started this whole murderous cycle, participate in the government, negotiate with us and also indulge the suicide bombers and the insurgents. The Shiites collaborate with us, run their own retaliatory death squads and dabble with Iran. The Saudis tell us we can't leave, but their mosques and charities funnel Sunni suicide bombers to Iraq and dollars to insurgents. Iran pushes its Iraqi Shiite allies to grab more power, while helping others kill U.S. troops. Ditto Syria.

O.K., boys, party's over: we're leaving by Dec. 1. From now on, everyone pays retail for their politics. We will no longer play host to a war where we're everyone's protector and target. If you Sunnis want to go on resisting, we'll leave you to the tender mercies of the Shiites, who vastly outnumber you. You Shiites,

if you want to run Iraq without compromising with Sunnis, fine, but you'll have to fight them alone and then risk having to live under the thumb of Iran.

You Saudis and other Arabs, if you don't use your influence to delegitimize Sunni suicide bombers and press Iraq's Sunnis to cut a deal, we won't protect you from the consequences. And Iran, you win - yes, if we leave, you win the right to try to manage Iraq's Shiites. Have a nice day.

But at the same time, we have to impose a tax that creates a floor price of \$3.50 a gallon for gasoline - forever. This is also about leverage. It says to all the parties: we are going to conserve enough gasoline and spur enough clean alternatives to fossil fuels that no matter what you all do in the Middle East, we will not depend on you for energy.

Today in Iraq, none of the key parties have to make any choices, and we don't have any choices. That is the definition of "stuck." Right now we can win only if all the parties in and around Iraq act in the most farsighted and flexible manner. Otherwise we lose in our attempt to democratize Iraq, and we're left holding the bag. We need to be in a win-win situation that we control.

"I don't think at this stage that the promise of 20,000 more troops will change any minds in Iraq," said Michael Mandelbaum, author of "The Case for Goliath." "But the threat of a lot fewer U.S. troops might conceivably get everyone focused. Right now, the U.S. is the passenger in a car that other countries are driving - and it's not going in the right direction. We have to change that dynamic."

Indeed we do. Once we've set a date to leave by and a gas price to live by, we, for the first time, will have choices in Iraq. We can stay to broker a deal if the parties want to be guided by their better angels or, if they want tribal instincts to reign, we can leave by Dec. 1 and insulate ourselves from Islam's civil war with a new energy policy.

To put it another way, if setting a date to leave miraculously brings them to their senses, our aspirations for the Iraqis will have been achieved, and we'll be stronger. And if it doesn't, but we have set an exit date and a gas price, we'll be out of Iraq and more energy-secure - and we'll also be stronger.

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