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The president's Iraq challenge — and ours

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What the country needs right now is an honest and forthright debate over the next step in Iraq. On Wednesday, speaking from the Rose Garden, President Bush delivered what in our view was the clearest and most specific presidential articulation of why the United States cannot cut and run from Iraq -- and what aid it would lend the terrorists if we did. The president began by painting the unvarnished picture of a violent and deeply troubled Iraq. "I fully understand the American people are seeing unspeakable violence on their TV screens. These are tough times in Iraq," he said. "The enemy is doing everything within its power to destroy the government and to drive us out of the Middle East, starting with driving us out of Iraq before the mission is done. The stakes are high. As a matter of fact, they couldn't be higher."

Then he recounted in no uncertain terms why we should expend blood and treasure on Iraq: "If we were to abandon that country before the Iraqis can defend their young democracy, the terrorists would take control of Iraq and establish a new safe haven from which to launch new attacks on America. How do I know that would happen? Because that's what the enemy has told us would happen. That's what they have said."

Next, Mr. Bush laid out the scenario we face if the United States decides to cut and run. "We can't tolerate a new terrorist state in the heart of the Middle East, with large oil reserves that could be used to fund its radical ambitions, or used to inflict economic damage on the West," he said. "By helping the Iraqis build a democracy -- an Iraqi-style democracy -- we will deal a major blow to terrorists and extremists. We'll bring hope to a troubled region. And we'll make this country more secure."

The post-cut-and-run future would be too dangerous to contemplate: "It is conceivable that there will be a world in which radical forms, extreme forms of religion fight each other for influence in the Middle East, in which they've got the capacity to use oil as an economic weapon. And when you throw in the mix a nuclear weapon in the hands of a sworn enemy of the United States, you begin to see an environment that would cause some later on in history to look back and say, how come they couldn't see the problem? What happened to them in the year 2006? Why weren't they able to see the problems now and

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deal with them before it came too late."

Americans know instinctively what's at stake. "Look, the American people want to know, can we win -- that's what they want to know -- and do we have a plan to win," the president said. Administration critics, he added, fall into several categories. "There are some who say, get out, it's not worth it. And those some of the voices, by the way, in the Democrat[ic] Party. Certainly not all Democrats, but some of the loud voices in the party say, get out," the president said. "There have been some votes on the floor of the Senate and the House that make it abundantly clear we just have a different view of the world."

He stuck by a useful phrase to describe them -- "cut and run" -- which Democrats loathe, but which depicts reality. They may not use the words "cut and run," to describe their position, the president said, but when they talk of leaving by a date certain before the mission is completed, it amounts to the same thing. Were we to get out of Iraq under such circumstances, Mr. Bush said, the consequences would be dire: "Defeat in Iraq will embolden an enemy. And I want to repeat to you the reality of the world in which we live. If we were to leave before the job is done, the enemy is coming after us. And most Americans...understand we've got to defeat them there so we don't face them here."

We await his critics to come forth to explain with the same clarity and specificity why it would be better for the United States to withdraw from Iraq before the job is complete.

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