

Quagmire: How long?

From the Editors in the [September 20, 2003](#) issue

Many of those who were skeptical about the U.S. invasion of Iraq, including the editors of this magazine, worried that sweeping away the devil of Saddam Hussein would—as in the parable in Luke 11—make way for several other kinds of devils. The devils appear alive and well in Iraq. While it is premature to describe Iraq as a quagmire for the U.S., the situation is “hellishly difficult,” to cite the words of Richard Holbrooke, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

U.S. occupying forces face daily guerrilla attacks, and they operate within a restless and suspicious population. The bombing of UN headquarters in Baghdad in late August and the subsequent attack on a Shi’ite mosque that killed Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim, a strategic friend of the U.S., showed how unstable the country is. It also demonstrated that those aiming to derail U.S. policies are well armed and well organized.

These events made the Bush administration ready to turn to the UN for help—a tacit admission that things are not going well, and that U.S. troops are stretched very thin. Doubtless the addition of international forces will help. But no conceivable number of foreign soldiers can provide security if they don’t have the support of the majority of Iraqis. That is one of the unsettling truths of being an occupier.

Which is why the obvious goal is to hand off power to the Iraqis themselves as soon as possible. Yet that can’t be done until security is achieved, which is a long way off. The Sunni-Shi’ite schism still simmers, and could erupt into sustained violence.

The one option the U.S. does not have in all this is to allow Iraq to devolve into further chaos. An unstable Iraq would introduce more instability in a volatile region and make it even more of a breeding ground for terrorists than it is now—precisely the opposite of what the U.S. aimed to achieve. The only option for the U.S., it seems, is to slog away at trying to establish a stable society and a functioning government, however long it takes and whatever it costs.

What will it cost? The financial implications have barely been addressed in Washington. The Bush administration is not eager to offer specifics. Independent estimates put the cost at \$400 billion to \$600 billion over ten years. The cost in American lives, judging from the pattern of the past few months, will be one or two soldiers each day.

How long will the occupation take? Five years? Ten years? No one knows. Nation-building, especially in the Middle East, comes with no guarantees of success.

Holbrooke has called the task of stabilizing Iraq the biggest foreign policy challenge for the U.S. since the war in Vietnam. Whatever stance one took on the war itself, this challenge is now unavoidable for Americans. The question is: Will the political leaders of both parties forthrightly describe the challenges, admit mistakes and acknowledge the costs?