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All the Time He Needs

President Bush said last week that he told his Iraq war commander, Gen. David Petraeus, that “he’ll have all the time he needs.” We know what that means. It means that the general, like the Iraqi government, should feel no pressure to figure a way out of this disastrous war. It means that even after 20,000 troops come home there will be nearly 140,000 American troops still fighting there — with no plan for further withdrawals and no plan for leading them to victory.

It means, as we’ve always suspected, that Mr. Bush’s only real strategy for Iraq has been to hand the mess off to his successor. Mr. Bush gave himself all the time he needs to walk away from one of the biggest strategic failures in American history.

General Petraeus and Ryan Crocker, the American ambassador to Baghdad, did not try to hide any of that in their Stay-the-Course 2008 Tour. There were the obligatory claims of military and political progress, but with a lot less specificity than during Stay-the-Course 2007. Mr. Crocker did not even bother to bring charts assessing Iraqi performance on political benchmarks. General Petraeus’s charts showed that American troop numbers would come down to around 140,000 this summer — but showed nothing beyond that.

When members of Congress pressed him to explain what would have to change on the ground for him to agree to further withdrawals, the general did not have an answer. He certainly is not getting any pressure from the White House to come up with one. As they say in the military, Mr. Bush is a short-timer, so why should he worry?

Whoever wins the presidency will not have the same luxury. He or she will have to start quickly planning for an orderly withdrawal. Even Senator John McCain will have to realize that America’s forces cannot sustain this pace for much longer. Earlier this month, The Times reported that repeated battlefield tours have so debilitated American troops that Army leaders fear for their mental health. Last week, Gen. Richard A. Cody, the Army vice chief of staff, warned Congress that the demand for troops in Iraq and Afghanistan “exceeds the sustainable supply.”

Mr. Bush cut Army combat tours in Iraq from 15 months to 12, but the Pentagon said that will not relieve the strains on troops and their families or allow the United States to send the reinforcements it desperately needs to Afghanistan.

The faltering American economy also cannot afford this never-ending war. Mr. Bush’s description of his latest emergency spending request as a “reasonable \$108 billion” proves just how out of touch he is with fiscal reality. His attempt to justify the overall \$600 billion cost so far by comparing his war to the cold war and the need to stop “Soviet expansion” shows that he is even more out of touch with strategic reality.

We believe that the fight against Al Qaeda is the central battle for this generation, but Mr. Bush’s claim that Iraq is the main front is wrong. That is Afghanistan, and the United States is in real danger of losing because Mr. Bush’s failed adventure in Iraq is eating up the Pentagon’s resources and attention.

It is clear that Mr. Bush has no intention of coming up with an exit strategy, but even now there are things he could be doing to give his successor a better shot at containing the chaos after American troops leave.

Press for Real Political Reforms The surge was supposed to give Iraqi politicians breathing room to make necessary political reforms. They still have not agreed on a law to equitably divide the country’s oil wealth, or rules for this fall’s provincial elections.

The performances in Washington last week merely confirmed what the Iraqis knew: the president is just playing out his string. Mr. Bush might have more luck telling Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki the truth: if the Democrats win in November, the days of enabling will certainly be over, and that is likely to happen even if

the Republicans hold the White House. If they know the Americans will not be there to guarantee their survival, Iraq’s leaders might be more open to compromise.

Make the Iraqis Pick Up the Check Even some of the war’s most enthusiastic G.O.P. backers on Capitol Hill are joining the Democrats to demand that the Iraqis start paying for military training and the fuel bill for American soldiers. We suspect that has a lot to do with voters’ fury over high gasoline prices, the mortgage crisis and the lagging economy.

The Iraqi government is estimated to keep \$27 billion in reserves in its central bank, \$30 billion more in American banks and tens of billions of dollars elsewhere. If they have to pick up more of the check, Iraqi leaders may be more eager to focus on political reform and improved military training.

Really Talk to the Neighbors Mr. Bush announced that he is dispatching senior American diplomats to the region to urge Arab states to do more to help Iraq, starting with reopening their embassies in Baghdad. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will also attend a conference of neighboring states and another aid-pledging meeting.

The problem goes far beyond embassies and aid. Foreign fighters are not the war’s main driver but they are a lethal problem. And once American troops withdraw, the temptation to meddle — by Iran and Syria but also by Turkey and Saudi Arabia — will be immense.

All these countries need to understand that chaos in Iraq is a threat to everyone, and there is no guarantee that it will not spill over Iraq’s borders. More bullying and bluster from the president is not likely to get that message across. Nor are canned speeches at conferences. Mr. Bush needs to send his top officials for serious one-on-one discussions with all of Iraq’s neighbors, including Iran and Syria.

Refugees There are now an estimated 2.4 million Iraqi refugees — mostly in Syria and Jordan — and 2.7 million more Iraqis displaced within their own country. The United States bears direct responsibility, and it needs to do a lot more to help these people survive and find safe refuge, back in Iraq or in other countries. It also needs to — humbly and urgently — ask its allies in Europe, Asia and the region for help.

Beyond the intolerable human suffering, huge flows of refugees could spread Iraq’s conflict far beyond its own borders. This is not a problem that can continue to be ignored.

An Honest Assessment of Iraq’s Army This White House has been spinning on Iraq for so long that we suppose we should thank Mr. Maliki for his recent reality check: his decision to send Iraqi forces into Basra to oust militias loyal to the radical cleric Moktada al-Sadr.

It was not a pretty sight. One thousand Iraqi soldiers and police officers refused to fight or deserted their posts. The battle ended with no winner and only after the Iranians helped broker a cease-fire. President Bush and General Petraeus owe the country a rigorous and honest assessment of the American training program, starting with what went wrong in Basra. What needs to be changed now to increase the chances that the Iraqi Army will eventually be able to fight its own battles? How long, realistically, will it take for that to happen?

Mr. Bush’s capacity for denial is limitless. Perhaps he believes that the next president will continue this misadventure without any end in mind, let alone in sight. Even then he owes it to his successor to use his remaining nine months in office to try to address Iraq’s myriad problems. That will not excuse Mr. Bush’s serial failures. But it may increase the chances for the inevitable withdrawal to be as orderly as possible.

Mr. Bush has all the time he needs, but Iraq’s suffering civilians do not, and neither do its masses of refugees, the bloodied and strained United States armed forces, or the American public.

Editorial Notebook

Of Witches and the Wait for Justice

In 1662, the colonists of Hartford accused 39-year-old Mary Sanford of witchcraft. Based on evidence — drinking wine and dancing around a bonfire — the court pronounced her guilty “for not having the feare of God before thynne eyes.” Sanford was hanged, leaving behind five children and a shaken husband who was later acquitted of similar charges.

More than three centuries later, Sanford’s descendants, 14-year-old Addie Avery and her mother, Debra, of New Milford, Conn., have petitioned the State Legislature to exonerate their distant grandmother and 10 other people executed for witchcraft. The fight has taught them something, perhaps more than they wanted to know, about the mob mentality.

The Averys did not always know they had a forebear accused of being a witch. A relative told them of their lineage and Sanford’s fate before a 2005 lecture on the Connecticut colony’s witch trials, which were sparked by widespread hysteria long before the better-known Salem witch trials of 1692. The lecture led to research, and the Averys took the first small steps toward asking the Legislature for exoneration. Along the way, they have learned what comes of taking a public stand.

Addie, who is home-schooled, researched every witch case in the colony. She was surprised to learn that all but two of the executed were women. Community leaders had presided over trials where the accused were usually the least educated and the least powerful. Women fit that bill nicely.

(Not much has changed there. Of the 170 people Connecticut has executed in over 300 years, only one was a college graduate, said Lawrence B. Goodheart, a University of Connecticut professor of history.)

Soon, the Averys’ lobbying attracted the support of other descendants of those who were accused. But critics spoke out, too, lashing out on Internet blogs. Ms. Avery was shaken to read the harsh comments, which reminded her of the mob frenzy that her ancestor faced. “The world has changed, but people haven’t,” she said.

Addie said she got a new education when she decided to publicly defend her ancestor. To her mother’s amazement, the attacks didn’t bother the suddenly thick-skinned teenager. “There are worse things than mockery,” Addie said. “Now, I’m not afraid to stand up when I see something wrong.”

Connecticut is slow to admit fault. It is not likely to soon join such states as Massachusetts and Virginia in acknowledging the injustice done to those accused in the witch hunts. A legislative committee passed on the issue this year.

But the prospect of returning to the Legislature next year, attending hearings and beginning the process all over again doesn’t seem to bother the Averys, least of all Addie. It may have taken more than 340 years, but finally someone is speaking up for Mary Sanford.

“I’ve discovered myself by honoring Mary,” Addie said.

MAURA J. CASEY

Universal Health Care, but by Whom?

To the Editor:

Re “Universal Coverage Strains Massachusetts Care” (front page, April 5):

So hundreds of thousands of Massachusetts residents have been forced to buy health insurance only to find that there are long waiting lists to see doctors for basic primary and preventive care.

Dr. Patricia A. Sereno, one of the doctors you cite who are struggling to fit newly insured patients into their practices, unconsciously reveals the fallacy, the false hopes and the real interests underlying state and national health care reform efforts that would require that everybody hold a health insurance policy. “It’s great that people have access to health care,” she says, “but now we’ve got to find a way to give them access to preventive services.”

Insurance is not health care. What Massachusetts has done successfully is to provide a new revenue stream for the private insurance system. What remains elusive is health care for all.

GEORGANNE CHAPIN

Tarrytown, N.Y., April 6, 2008

The writer is president and chief executive of the Hudson Health Plan, a not-for-profit managed care organization.

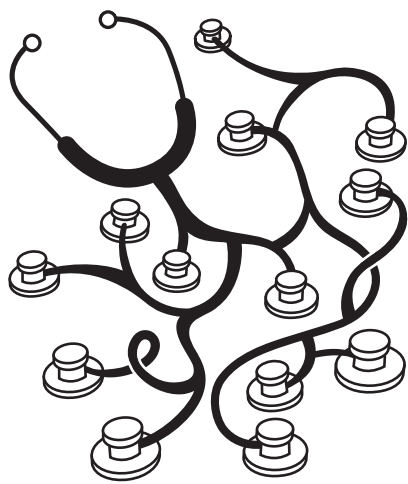
the growing problem of access to primary care in Massachusetts. The problem has been worsened by our universal health care initiative, which was missing a strategy to increase the number of providers to serve the increase in patient load.

Your article, however, focused on increasing the number of doctors to solve the primary care shortage. Nurse practitioners have been filling this role for more than three decades by providing the best in health care.

We are the future of primary care. Make an appointment. We’re open.

ROBB STENSON

West Falmouth, Mass., April 7, 2008



JENNIFER DANIEL

To the Editor:

When I received my recent acceptance package for Boston University’s School of Medicine for the fall 2008 class, included was information about costs for the current academic year at B.U.S.M.

Tuition: \$42,734
Fees: \$2,914
Room and board: \$11,933
Books and supplies: \$2,845

The tuition is expected to increase by at least 4.5 percent next year. Only about 30 percent of students at the school will receive any scholarship or grant aid from any source.

Many students can expect to graduate from medical school with debt of about a quarter-million dollars, not to mention any undergraduate debt that may remain.

With a debt load that size, a family practice doctor would probably take home less money than a registered nurse. Until the reimbursement system is fixed and the debt load addressed, there will be a shortage in primary care. The numbers don’t lie. LEE SHAPLEY
Philadelphia, April 7, 2008

To the Editor:

In California, nearly eight million people live in officially designated primary care shortage areas. Millions more seriously ill patients must wait several weeks for appointments or seek care in emergency rooms, which drives up health care costs and leaves patients without essential follow-up care.

Family physicians in California support universal coverage and comprehensive health care reform that addresses the primary care doctor shortage. Ignoring this problem would derail any attempt to provide universal health care.

The lopsided payment system that richly rewards doctors who treat progressed illnesses but expects family physicians to subsidize the care that keeps America healthy must be changed.

In February 2008, yet another major study — this one by the Government Accountability Office — reported that primary care improves health outcomes and lowers health care costs. What are our elected leaders waiting for?

CARLA KAKUTANI

Winters, Calif., April 7, 2008

The writer is president of the California Academy of Family Physicians.

To the Editor:

Thank you for bringing attention to

It Takes Practice to Talk to Teenagers About Sex

To the Editor:

Re “Talk to Parents About Sex? Yeah, Right,” by Michael Winerip (Parenting column, regional sections, April 6):

As a sexuality educator for almost 20 years, I was disappointed to read that after observing a three-hour program about sexuality for teenagers and parents, Mr. Winerip felt that the prospect for having an open dialogue about sex was “pretty much devoid of hope.”

I applaud all opportunities for parents to talk with their children, but parents should begin to talk about sexuality long before the teenage years.

Teaching our children early on how to assess risks in any number of areas helps them become thoughtful, safe and responsible adults. We want them to know our values as parents. This does not happen in one conversation, but rather in many conversations as our children grow.

Drug Makers’ Advantage

To the Editor:

Re “Drug Makers Near Old Goal: A Legal Shield” (front page, April 6):

There is a kind of Alice-in-Wonderland quality as the Supreme Court comes closer to affirming Food and Drug Administration pre-emption.

Every few months, another study concludes that the F.D.A. cannot fulfill even its basic responsibilities. Until the Bush administration, the F.D.A. itself viewed civil liability and its own regulation as complementary systems of consumer protection. And yet we are about to throw one of those systems away.

Like the doctrine of pre-emptive war that led to Iraq, F.D.A. pre-emption is a policy concocted in oblivion, an ideology without connection to the ways the agency and industry actually work. The editors of The New England Journal of Medicine recently wrote that that policy would have cataclysmic consequences for patients’ rights, industry accountability and public health.

It is not often that doctors defend trial lawyers. Having now heard what the most respected voice in American medicine has to say, we should have no illusions where we are headed.

HENRY GREENSPAN

Ann Arbor, Mich., April 7, 2008

The writer is a faculty scholar in integrative medicine, University of Michigan.

ONLINE: MORE LETTERS

Responses to Nicholas D. Kristof’s column about racism and sexism, and Roger Cohen’s online column about China and Tibet. Also: An investing tale.

nytimes.com/opinion

In a given day, parents have a wealth of opportunities to share their values in casual conversations. Teenagers need parents who learn to be comfortable using these teachable moments to share their values, which takes practice.

Despite what teenagers say, studies show that teenagers want their parents to share their values about sexuality with them. Furthermore, teenagers whose parents have overcome their discomfort delay having sexual intercourse. SUZANNE WITZENBURG

Director
Education and Training
Planned Parenthood Hudson Peconic
Smittstown, N.Y., April 7, 2008

Philosophy, Examined

To the Editor:

Re “In a New Generation of College Students, Many Opt for the Life Examined” (news article, April 6):

As a philosophy professor at Brown University, I was interested to read that the executive director of the American Philosophical Association, David E. Schrader, claims that philosophy helps students become “quick learners,” and that the Rutgers philosophy department encourages philosophy as a pre-law track “by pointing out that their majors score high on the LSAT.”

I hope that philosophy students will use their “verbal and logic skills” to ask for hard evidence that philosophy courses are more helpful than other courses in producing quick learners, and that philosophy courses improve LSAT scores rather than simply attracting the sorts of students who do well on such tests.

Shouldn’t the claims of philosophy salesmen be scrutinized as critically as those of used car salesmen?

FELICIA NIMUE ACKERMAN
Providence, R.I., April 7, 2008

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