



WMRC Article

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Downing of US Helicopter in
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for Bush Administration

United States: Downing of US Helicopter in Iraq Could be Turning Point for Bush Administration

The shooting down of a US Army Chinook transport helicopter by shoulder-fired missiles in Iraq on Sunday (2 November), killing 16 servicemen and wounding scores more, marks a dramatic turn in the US-led occupation that will undoubtedly have political implications for the Bush administration.

WMRC Perspective	
Significance	The dramatic downing of a US helicopter with shoulder-fired missiles just outside Baghdad, which killed 16 soldiers and wounded several others, marks a new and much more dangerous threat to military forces in the country.
Implications	US aircraft operating in Iraq are highly susceptible to this type of attack and guerrilla forces are believed to have thousands of these missiles at their disposal, making further attacks increasingly likely and raising the chances of serious damage and casualties.
Outlook	As the ongoing US occupation of Iraq becomes increasingly deadly for US forces at the hands of more sophisticated tactics used by guerrillas, the more pressure the Bush administration will feel to withdraw troops and obtain substantial international assistance.

The Sky is Falling

The Chinook helicopter shot down on Sunday (2 November) just outside Baghdad is the US Army's version of a shuttle bus for soldiers and is one of the more widely used transports in the Iraqi theatre. However, they are slow-moving and virtually defenceless from the kind of lightweight, yet highly accurate heat-seeking missiles such as the one used in this latest attack. Guerrillas and other insurgent elements are suspected of having thousands of such weapons that can be used against helicopters and planes operating in and around Baghdad. Although many military planes have counter-measures to protect against missile attack, most non-combat helicopters and some planes do not and are highly vulnerable. The latest attack was the most deadly single strike of the entire conflict thus far, which when coupled with the manner of the attack, represents a serious escalation of technical sophistication and willingness to cause maximum damage and death.

A Blank Cheque

The attack came at a difficult time for the Bush administration, as it was lobbying the US Congress to give its final approval to an US\$87.5bn spending package, most of which was earmarked for ongoing operations in Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan. The US Senate's approval, which came yesterday, is the final hurdle before the bill goes to Bush for his signature, and opposition Senators used the downing of the helicopter the previous day to reiterate their criticisms of the Bush administration and its inability to bring stability to Iraq six months beyond the official declaration that open hostilities had ended. As the security situation grows dramatically worse rather than better, the billions of US dollars for the occupation and reconstruction will clearly not be the last multi-billion spending bill for the country. The Bush administration successfully compelled Congressional negotiators to drop the provision of the bill that would have required several billion dollars of aid to be considered a loan, rather than a grant, which would be repaid through future oil revenues, but the victory was a hollow one against the backdrop of the deadly attack on the Army helicopter.

Swaggerless Bush

Bush was quick to declare 'mission accomplished' aboard a US aircraft carrier in May when he assured the US and the world that open hostilities had ended and that a state of normalcy would soon follow, shortly after which the US occupying forces would withdraw. At this point, Bush's approval rating percentage was in the high 70s, even though there was growing criticism from political opponents that he had yet to adequately demonstrate the compelling need to forcibly remove the regime of Saddam Hussein over his suspected possession of weapons of mass destruction. Although Bush lost some support as criticisms grew more intense, the real political problems started once more and more US soldiers in Iraq were killed in guerrilla-style attacks, and have continued on their steep declining trajectory

ever since. In response, the Bush administration launched a campaign to ensure passage of a United Nations Security Council Resolution supporting the reconstruction effort, although key allies have still not committed troops or even financial assistance, in spite of Bush's new, more conciliatory diplomatic tone.

Democrat Criticism

Shortly after, and due to the attacks of 11 September 2001, the presidency of George W Bush was redefined by the launch of the global war on terrorism, which led his administration to attack Iraq and remove the Hussein regime. As the occupation has become bogged down by increasingly brazen, co-ordinated and sophisticated guerrilla attacks on US troops, aid organisations and infrastructure, Bush's Democratic challengers have sharpened their attacks on his leadership ability and foreign policy agenda. Although eight of the nine candidates attempting to replace Bush in elections being held a year from today have not said they would pull all US troops out of Iraq if elected, most have pledged to do whatever is necessary to bring more international forces to the country in order to begin withdrawing US troops. Between now and the election, the ongoing struggle in Iraq will define the presidential campaign, and if further and deadlier attacks are carried out as expected, the pressure on Bush to alleviate the situation will only increase.

The Perfect Storm

With one year to go before the presidential election, and with the US occupation in Iraq more likely to get worse before it gets better, Bush is in serious jeopardy of following in his father's one-term footsteps. The state of affairs in Iraq has created a 'perfect storm' of political challenges:

- lack of confidence - Bush pegged his success on his foreign policy agenda and the American public has progressively lost faith in his ability on foreign affairs;
- lack of credibility - the absence of any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq despite the Bush administration's insistence on their existence as the premise for going to war had dramatically reduced his credibility with voters; and
- political hubris - Bush's arrogance was tolerated and even respected by many Americans when he appeared to be in control, but as the Iraq situation has deteriorated, his continuing arrogant stance is resulting in his isolation from foreign allies as well as from voters.

None of these challenges in isolation would prove to be a significant threat, but when combined they may spell the end of Bush.

Outlook and Implications

A major strike against US forces in Iraq accompanied by the worldwide broadcast images of the carnage will turn the whispers into roars for a dramatic shift in policy towards Iraq and the ongoing occupation. Historical examples include:

- 1968 - the North Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive against cities in South Vietnam, and although they were successfully repelled by US forces and suffered massive losses, the images of war-scarred cities and an errant and minor attack on the US Embassy in Saigon (South Vietnam) marked the turning point of the US public's support for the war;
- 1983 - a truck bomb struck the US Marine Barracks in Lebanon and killed nearly 250 Marines while they slept in their beds. The US pulled out a few months later;
- 1993 - 18 elite US soldiers were killed and 84 wounded in Somalia while on a humanitarian mission, during a battle that began as an effort to rescue the pilots of two downed helicopters. Images of the crowds dragging bodies of US soldiers through the street were broadcast worldwide and US forces left the country a few months later.

The US public has given President Bush the benefit of the doubt so far, but their willingness to stick with Bush and see if he can turn the situation around is fading quickly. Americans have a comparatively weak stomach when it comes to images of young men coming home in body bags.

The Bush administration is facing a public that is growing increasingly sceptical of why US troops are continuing to die in Iraq, a credibility gap as the public questions whether the Bush administration can be trusted, and a political climate that is using the situation in the country to score political points. A massive, visible strike by insurgents in Iraq would catalyse the effort to bring the troops home among the public, members of Congress from both parties, and the media, which would put Bush in a politically untenable position since he had pledged to stay in Iraq for as

long as it takes. Such a decision could be the defining moment that marks the end of his presidency.

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