Reflecting the Government’s Point of View:
Grand Rapids Press Coverage of Iraq and Iran

November 11 – December 9, 2007

Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy (GRIID)
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About GRIID

GRIID has operated since 1998 and has functioned around three services it offers to the public:

- GRIID acts as a media watchdog and has primarily monitored and published reports about local news.
- GRIID does general media literacy education through workshops, public presentations, and in partnership with other educational groups.
- GRIID works with grassroots and community based groups to develop media strategies and use media as an organizing tool.

Methodology

The Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy (GRIID) looked at all stories in the Grand Rapids Press covering Iraq and Iran for a four-week period, from November 11 through December 9, 2007. GRIID took all local and wire service stories on Iraq and Iran that appeared in “Section A,” the “Region” section, and the “Business” section. This included full stories and shorter stories usually referred to in the Press as “Briefs.”

All news stories are included in Appendix A and the Briefs are in Appendix B. You will notice that many of the stories have some text that is in bold, which signifies that this was part of the original story that was not included in the Grand Rapids Press version.

GRIID looked at the amount (48) of stories/Briefs and where they appeared in the paper. We documented stories by theme and found that there were “in country” stories, stories based on US Military strategies, US policy stories, stories with an international focus, violence-based stories, stories that dealt with Private “security contractors,” and local stories. GRIID also looked at how stories were framed, and who was sourced in the stories. Sources cited can be found in Appendix C and all other data can be found in Appendix D.
Content Analysis

Iraq

There were a total of 42 stories on Iraq during the 4-week study period, with 10 Briefs and 32 full articles. There were several themes addressed in these stories – stories that dealt with what was happening in Iraq that were not war focused, stories based on US military strategies, US policy stories, stories with an international focus, violence-based stories, stories that dealt with private “security contractors,” and local stories. The bulk of the stories dealt with US Military strategies, violence in Iraq, military contractors, and US policy on the occupation of Iraq. The only time that Iraqi perspectives are central in the stories were more human interest, such as the Nov. 11 article that looked at an Iraqi liquor storeowner. When it came to policy matters or human rights issues, Iraqi voices were almost completely absent. As is documented in Appendix C, there were 46 times that US sources were cited as compared to only 9 times that readers were provided an Iraqi perspective.

There were 10 articles that focused on US military strategy, including what “gains” or “progress” the US was making in the Iraq war. Consequently, it is no surprise that US military personal are the most widely sourced (22 times) in this 4-week period, with the bulk of those cited being high-ranking officials. There were two stories each on how the US is training Iraqis (Nov. 24 & Dec. 9), how the US was not going to shift Marines from Iraq to Afghanistan (Dec. 6), the use of a new weapons system in Iraq (Nov. 22), and how the US military is working with various Iraqi factions to fight the Insurgency (Nov. 24 & 25). All of these stories present the US presence in Iraqi as fairly positive and adds to the general media coverage trend since September that the “surge” has been working. This trend is so prominent that there is virtually no mention of US troop withdrawal from Iraq, despite public support being at 54% for bringing US troops home immediately, according to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

A total of 9 stories focused on violence in Iraq during the study period. Most of these stories provided little context for the violence and the reporting reflected violence against both Iraqi civilians and US troops. There are no stories that focused on US military violence perpetrated against Iraqi civilians except in a Nov. 19 Brief that mentions two Iraqi civilians were killed. If anything the stories dealing with this theme tend to present violence as on the decline, such as the story on Nov. 13 with the headline “Baghdad violence down sharply” and a Dec. 2 Brief titled “Iraqi death toll falls again.” In the Dec. 2 Brief, there are statistics provided on Iraqi deaths “according to an Associated Press tally.” There are never any stories that cite human rights reports on Iraqi deaths during this 4-week study, nor is there any mention of the longstanding documentation of groups like Iraq Body Count.

There were a total of six stories that dealt with private military contractors in this study period, with one focused on DynCorp (Nov. 12) and the other 5 dealing with the ongoing Blackwater USA investigation. The Blackwater USA stories provide very little information on the
government investigation and no substantive exploration of the historical relationship this private military contractor has with the government.

A good example is the New York Times story that appeared in the Grand Rapids Press on Nov. 18. The story frames the issue in the headline and in the first few paragraphs as having more to do with a "family feud" and "family estrangement" than the issue of corruption. The only sources cited in the story are those of the Krongard brothers and Rep. Waxman. At a committee hearing Rep. Waxman requested numerous documents from Mr. Krongard on Blackwater USA, but there is no mention of what exactly was requested by the Representative. There is a section of the original New York Times story that was omitted in the Grand Rapids Press version. The omitted text has more details on Krongard's role in assisting Blackwater USA CEO Erik Prince in procuring mercenary contracts in Afghanistan. Considering the local connection of Erik Prince on this investigation of Blackwater USA's human rights abuses, it is unfortunate that the Grand Rapids Press does not provide better coverage or at least utilize independent sources who have been following this issue with great detail, such as investigative reporter Jeremy Scahill.

The last issue to receive significant attention during the study period was US policy on the Iraq war. There were five stories—a Nov. 12 story about Bush putting aside partisan politics to celebrate Veteran’s Day, a Nov. 28 story that deals with polling on US policy in Iraq, and Nov. 15, 17, and Dec. 9, all which deal with US funding for the war in Iraq. The Nov. 15 Associated Press story was based on a Congressional vote on Iraq War funding legislation. The version that the Grand Rapids Press ran was considerably shorter than the original version. The omitted portion of the AP story provides some of the details of the bill that was passed in the House of Representatives, bill H.R.4156. Why would the Press omit the text of the story that actually provided readers with what the legislation was proposing? The shortened version of the story gives the impression that this legislation is about "bringing troops home in coming weeks with a goal of ending combat by December 2008," when in fact, what H.R.4156 actually says is that US troops will be redeployed in Iraq and that as many as 30,000 US troops will remain in that country.

Two days later (Nov. 17), the story focused on the Senate vote. The AP story begins by saying that the Democrats have failed to stop funding the war or bring US troops home despite being elected a year ago by an anti-war vote. The story ends with similar comments but says:

"Since taking the reins of Congress in January, Democrats have struggled to pass any significant anti-war legislation. Measures that passed along party lines in the House repeatedly sank in the Senate, where Democrats hold a much narrower majority and 60 votes are routinely needed to overcome procedural hurdles."

Why doesn't the story further investigate the Democrat's failure to block funding for the war? The article also states, "The delay will satisfy a Democratic support base that is fiercely anti-war." What is this statement based on? There was no poll or any response by the Democratic Party's base to support such a claim. It may be true that the Democratic Party’s base of supporters are disproportionately anti-war, but this story and the December 9 article present the Democratic Party themselves as being in opposition to the administration’s Iraq policy and as an anti-war party, despite voting for every funding request for the war since January of 2007. In
addition to presenting the Democratic Party as representing anti-war sentiment, the Grand Rapids Press never mentions or cites a single anti-war organization, whether they are locally based or one of the national groups that continue to be active and could provide an counter-position on these legislative issues.

This 4-week investigation into the Grand Rapids Press coverage of Iraq continues to do what we have documented in studies since 2003. The coverage reflects the positions of the Bush administration, it minimizes the human cost of the war, marginalizes Iraqi and international voices, and fails to present any real anti-war perspectives.

Iran

There were only six stories (3 articles and 3 Briefs) that dealt with Iran during the 4-week study. One of the briefs (Dec. 4) mentions that Iran asked the Canadian Ambassador to leave. The Brief does not provide any reasons for this action and only sources the Canadian government. Another Brief (Nov. 12) has Michigan Congressman Vern Ehlers stating that he is opposed to going to war with Iran and that he can see no good coming from such an action. While Ehlers has never publicly stated he is in favor of war with Iran, he has voted on legislation that marginalizes that country. The other Brief (Nov. 21) and the three articles on Iran all deal with Iran’s nuclear program and US diplomatic response to that program.

The first article appeared on Nov. 20 and focused on Iran’s President and Venezuelan’s Hugo Chavez attempt to get OPEC to switch its pricing away from US dollars. It is not until you read the original version of this Associated Press (AP) story however, that you find any information about Iran’s nuclear program. There is no mention in the Associated Press story about the November 15 release of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report regarding Iran. The report is generally positive towards Iran's cooperation with the IAEA, even though the Western news media fails to mention that.

The remaining two stories deal with the findings of the National Intelligence Estimate report on Iran’s nuclear program (Dec. 4) and the Bush administration’s reaction to that report (Dec. 5). The December 4 article is headlined “World War III can wait” and is framed in such a way that would make readers think that war with Iran was inevitable and that the findings of this new study are a major setback for the Bush administration. The reporter states of the findings, "It will certainly weaken international support for tougher sanctions against Iran," and:

"The biggest change, though, could be its effect on President Bush’s last year in office, as well as on the campaign to replace him. Until Monday, 2008 seemed to be a year destined to be consumed, at least when it comes to foreign policy, by the prospects of confrontation with Iran."

It is as if the reporter is just as surprised by the intelligence study as the Bush administration. This pro-administration position by the mainstream news media on Iran is not new. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) noted that the major media adopted much of the Bush administration’s claims about Iran in 2005 and more recently in 2007.
The December 5 story was from the *New York Times* and is based on President Bush's response to the finding of a new [National Intelligence Estimate report](https://www.nationalintelligence.gov/) on Iran's nuclear program. Bush is cited as saying that despite the report's findings Iran is still a threat, but nothing that the President says in the story, nor anything the reporter writes provides an evidence that Iran is still a threat. The President says, "Look, Iran was dangerous, Iran is dangerous, and Iran will be dangerous, if they have the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon." A reasonable question for the reporter to have asked could have been, "Iran is dangerous based on what evidence?"

Even though the coverage of Iran was quite limited during this 4-week study period, it is clear that the stories are biased towards the US administration’s position on Iran with virtually no mention of what Iran thinks about the current US policy on their country, nor does *the Grand Rapids Press* provide readers with where the international community stands in regards to Iran.
It's Thursday night, the end of the Iraqi work week, and Fami Ameen is scrambling in his crowded Assassin's Gate liquor store as customers clamor for everything from beer and whiskey to ouzo and arak, the popular local alcohol. Call Mr. Ameen an unexpected beneficiary of the "surge." For decades, Iraq had a reputation as a modern, secular society that liked to drink and knew how to party, from wild hotel discotheques to genteel members-only social clubs. But after the fall of Saddam Hussein, extremists unleashed waves of firebombings against liquor stores, even killing owners, because alcohol is forbidden under Islamic law.

Just a year ago, Iraqis' taste for alcohol, and the businesses that sated it, were written off as a casualty of the country's new Islam-dominated order.

But violence in Baghdad has dropped in recent months under the American military's security crackdown. And although many stores are still shuttered, their faded Carlsberg awnings caked with dirt, the booze business has rebounded, as Iraqis negotiating the gulf between their faith and their proclivities strike a delicate balance, discreetly traveling from all over the city, and even other provinces, to the remaining liquor shops.

"People were reluctant to make the trip before the past six months, but now they are encouraged with the somewhat alleviated security," Mr. Ameen said. "My wish is that the trend would continue, and we could go back to the prewar levels of distribution — perhaps even more."

With new shops like Mr. Ameen's opening in secured areas near fortified Western military outposts, some retailers even say their sales have declined, because they now have so much competition. In one dubious measure of the progress, they say their biggest fear is no longer the militias that targeted them for religious reasons, but the criminal gangs that would kidnap them for their revived fortunes.

Mr. Ameen, 27, a burly man with a big mustache, recalls arriving at his old liquor store in east Baghdad one morning three years ago, only to discover it was gone. "It was blown to smithereens, just like that," he said.

He had a second shop in the mostly Shiite district of Karada, but closed it out of fear it would suffer the same fate. He then moved his businesses to the Assassin's Gate, a sandstone arch just
outside the entrance to the heavily fortified Green Zone. Two months ago, he consolidated into a larger space across the street.

Ahmed Abud, 35, lives in the Shiite neighborhood of Sadr City, where all the liquor shops have closed. But as a truck driver, he has a good reason to be driving all over the city, and he took advantage of that with a stop at Mr. Ameen's on a recent day for two tall-boys of Heineken, which cost a little more than a dollar apiece. (Whiskey goes for about $21 a bottle).

"I'm from Sadr City, and I can't buy alcohol from there like before the war, so I have to make trips to places like these," he said. "It would be nice to be able to buy it from closer areas."

The restrictions on alcohol consumption began in the 1990s, when, in an effort to shore up support among religious conservatives, Saddam banned drinking in public, including in restaurants, clubs, bars, and hotels.

The move had economic appeal too, because it prevented the conspicuous consumption of expensive Western alcohol by a shrinking upper class, curbing resentment among a growing class of low- and moderate-income Iraqis stung by U.N. sanctions in the 1990s who no longer could afford such luxuries.

The clubs and bars that were legendary for all-night hedonism faded away. Only liquor stores run by non-Muslims were allowed to remain, and Iraqis' revelry was relegated to their homes. But even that became more difficult after the American-led invasion in 2003, when liquor stores across Iraq, especially in the Shiite south, closed down amid the threats and violence.

**Nov. 11 A12**

**Iraqis told dam may fail**

*Washington Post*

The largest dam in Iraq is in serious danger of an imminent collapse that could unleash a trillion-gallon wave of water, possibly killing thousands of people and flooding two of the largest cities in the country, according to new assessments by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other U.S. officials.

Even in a country gripped by daily bloodshed, the possibility of a catastrophic failure of the Mosul Dam has alarmed American officials, who have concluded that it could lead to as many as 500,000 civilian deaths by drowning Mosul under 65 feet of water and parts of Baghdad under 15 feet, said Abdulhalik Thanoon Ayoub, the dam manager. "The Mosul dam is judged to have an unacceptable annual failure probability," in the dry wording of an Army Corps of Engineers draft report.

At the same time, a U.S. reconstruction project to help shore up the dam in northern Iraq has been marred by incompetence and mismanagement, according to Iraqi officials and a report by a U.S. oversight agency to be released Tuesday. The reconstruction project, worth at least $27
million, was not intended to be a permanent solution to the dam's deficiencies.

"In terms of internal erosion potential of the foundation, Mosul Dam is the most dangerous dam in the world," the Army Corps concluded in September 2006, according to the report to be released Tuesday. "If a small problem [at] Mosul Dam occurs, failure is likely."

The effort to prevent a failure of the dam has been complicated by behind-the-scenes wrangling between Iraqi and U.S. officials over the severity of the problem and how much money should be allocated to fix it. The Army Corps has recommended building a second dam downstream as a fail-safe measure, but Iraqi officials have rejected the proposal, arguing that it is unnecessary and too expensive.

The debate has taken place largely out of public view because both Iraqi and U.S. Embassy officials have refused to discuss the details of safety studies -- commissioned by the U.S. government for at least $6 million -- so as not to frighten Iraqi citizens. Portions of the draft report were read to The Washington Post by an Army Corps official who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter. The Post also reviewed an Army Corps PowerPoint presentation on the dam.

"The Army Corps of Engineers determined that the dam presented unacceptable risks," U.S. Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker and Gen. David H. Petraeus, the U.S. commander in Iraq, wrote in a May 3 letter to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. "Assuming a worst-case scenario, an instantaneous failure of Mosul Dam filled to its maximum operating level could result in a flood wave 20 meters deep at the City of Mosul, which would result in a significant loss of life and property."

Sitting in a picturesque valley 45 miles along the Tigris River north of Mosul, the earthen dam has one fundamental problem: It was built on top of gypsum, which dissolves when it comes into contact with water.

Almost immediately after the dam was completed in the early 1980s, engineers began injecting the dam with grout, a liquefied mixture of cement and other additives. More than 50,000 tons of material have been pumped into the dam since then in a continual effort to prevent the structure, which can hold up to 3 trillion gallons of water, from collapsing.

After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, American officials began to study risks posed by the dam, which they said were underestimated by Iraqis.

"Iraqi government believes dam is safe," concluded a 32-page PowerPoint presentation prepared by the Army Corps and dated December 2006.

On a tour of the dam on a recent blistering afternoon, Ayoub, the manager, contended that the dam was safe but acknowledged the unusual problems with it.

Seepage from the dam funnels into a gushing stream of water that engineers monitor to
determine the severity of the leakage. Twenty-four clanging machines churn 24 hours a day to pump grout deep into the dam's base. And sinkholes form periodically as the gypsum dissolves beneath the structure.

"You cannot find any other dam in the world like this," said Ayoub, a mustachioed man in a dark business suit who has worked at the dam since 1983 and has managed it since 1989.

About two years ago, Ayoub became concerned that the pressure of the water was putting the dam at risk of failure. So he ordered that the dam's water level, which can reach 330 meters above sea level, not exceed 319 meters.

But reports prepared by the Army Corps of Engineers began to raise new alarms.

"Mosul Dam is 'unsafe' in any definition," the PowerPoint presentation said. It added: "Condition continually degrading" and "Failure mode is credible." Under a section labeled "Consequences of Failure," it says: "Mass civilian fatalities."

Ayoub said U.S. officials spoke in person about the dam in even more apocalyptic terms. "They went to the Ministry of Water Resources and told them that the dam could collapse any day," he said.

The report so alarmed the governor of Nineveh province, where the dam is located, that he asked that it be drained of all water immediately, Ayoub said.

Ayoub said he agrees that the most catastrophic collapse of the dam could kill 500,000 people, but he said U.S. officials have not convinced him that the structure is at high risk of collapse. "The Americans may very well be right about the danger," Ayoub said. "I think it is safe enough that my office is in the flood plain."

In an interview Monday night, Abdul Latif Rashid, Iraq's minister of water resources, said that he believed the safety situation was not critical and that he was more inclined to trust his engineers than American reports.

"Is the dam going to collapse tomorrow?" Rashid said. "I can't tell you that. Let us hope that we avoid a disaster and focus now on a solution."

The Army Corps has recommended that a partially constructed dam at Badush, which lies between Mosul Dam and the city, be finished as a stopgap measure in case Mosul Dam collapses.

But Salar Bakir Sami, director general of planning and development at the Water Resources Ministry, said Iraqi government officials do not think it is necessary to spend the estimated $10 billion for such a project. Instead, he said, the ministry planned to spend $300 million to construct a smaller version of the Badush dam that would generate electricity and provide irrigation, but not serve as a safety valve in case Mosul Dam breaks.
Rashid said his top priority is to fix Mosul Dam by building a concrete wall at its foundation that should shore up the design and provide "a permanent solution." He said experts have just discovered cutting-edge technology that would allow such a wall to be built, perhaps with construction starting by next year at a cost of less than $1 billion.

In the report to be released Tuesday, the Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, a federal oversight agency, found that little of the reconstruction effort led by the U.S. Embassy has succeeded in improving the dam. The office reviewed contracts worth $27 million, but an embassy official said the total cost of the project was $34 million.

The review found that a Turkish company, which was paid $635,000 for a contract awarded 19 months ago to build storage silos for cement, had done so little and such poor-quality work that its project may have to be restarted. One company contracted to design grout-mixing plants instead submitted plans for unusable concrete-mixing plants. High-tech equipment meant to help grouting is gathering dust because it won't work, according to investigators.

Embassy and Army Corps officials noted that it has been difficult to conduct oversight of the project because it is in a dangerous area. They said that contracts with the worst businesses have been terminated and that steps have been taken to ensure better management of the project in the future.

"Our focus is on whether the project that the Corps undertook got carried out and the answer to that question is no," said Stuart W. Bowen Jr., the special inspector general. "The expenditures of the money have yielded no benefit yet."

**Nov. 12   A1**  
**Bush abandons partisanship for empathy**  
**LA Times**

In the simple hall -- linoleum floor, white cinder-block walls -- that is home to American Legion Post 121, President Bush on Sunday told the families of two soldiers and two Marines who died in Iraq that "their sacrifice will not be in vain."

His brief message on Veterans Day was one that finds its way regularly into his speeches about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in his now-frequent private meetings with families of the wars' casualties.

But on Sunday, his part in the ceremony, a six-minute speech, suggested an afterthought -- after four mayors awkwardly read the stilted language of memorial resolutions, after the presentation of Lone Star flags that had flown over the Capitol in Austin, Texas, and after "gold star" banners were handed to mothers and widows.

Bush sat through it all -- the recounting, one by one, of the lives and the losses -- and by the time he was called to speak before about 200 people, he abandoned what had been planned as the
political focus of his remarks: an attack on Democrats for not yet approving the Veterans Affairs appropriation.

"He felt it was more appropriate to shorten his remarks," White House spokesman Gordon D. Johndroe said.

Bush was seated in the second row; parents and widows were in the first. He sat next to Janie Shanks, grandmother of Marine Gunnery Sgt. John David Fry, who was 28 when he died in Iraq on March 8, 2006.

On one mission, Fry, the father of three children, entered a home to disarm an improvised bomb strapped to a retarded child, said Democratic Rep. Chet Edwards, whose congressional district includes Waco.

Days before his tour was to end, Fry volunteered for another mission to defuse a bomb, Edwards said. That one killed him.

On Sunday, there was an elderly bugler in a yellow cap, white gloves grasping his horn as he blew taps. A local woman, Ann Harder, sang "God Bless America" a cappella and solo, until she paused, said, "Sing with me," and 200 voices joined in.

The post commander, Clayton Hueske, admitted he was nervous and stumbled over his words; another speaker gave the audience permission to cry.

Some speakers, but not all, were dressed in jacket and tie. In the audience were leather motorcycle vests, a white shirt with an American flag, a red 2004 state high school football championship T-shirt -- and, throughout, the quiet sound of sniffing.

"The young men we remember today did not live to be called veterans," Bush said in his speech. "The valor and selfless devotion of these men fills their families with immeasurable pride. Yet this pride cannot fill the hole in their loved ones' aching hearts, or relieve the burden of grief that will remain for a lifetime.

"In their sorrow," he said, "these families need to know, and families all across the nation of the fallen need to know, that your loved ones served a cause that is good, and just, and noble."

Nov. 13 A1
Soldiers’ mental troubles delayed
The Grand Rapids Press

Tony Covell thought many of his fellow Iraq war veterans had escaped the emotional scars of combat, but often, their mental health problems were only delayed.

"It's been my experience that it's usually something that triggers it," said Covell, a Cedar Springs native badly burned by a roadside bomb in Iraq three years ago. "I know a lot of guys who seemed fine until they went to a Fourth of July celebration. Between the pops and the flashes,
they couldn't handle it.”

Even for those without an obvious trigger, an increasing number of war veterans report the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, alcohol abuse and other mental health concerns months after returning home, according to a study to be published in Wednesday's Journal of the American Medical Association.

Most soldiers and Marines coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan are screened for mental health problems shortly after returning. After preliminary data showed the initial screening might be missing some signs of mental distress, the Department of Defense began screening service members three to six months after their return.

More soldiers reported mental health problems in the second screening than in the first, said Dr. Charles Milliken, who conducted the study with his colleagues at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. The combined data from both screenings showed 20 percent of active duty soldiers and 42 percent of reservists had symptoms that required referrals for mental health care.

About half of those diagnosed with mental health problems in the first screening reported fewer symptoms in the second screening, the study found, suggesting it is important for treatment to begin before the soldier leaves active duty. Reserve soldiers who had returned to civilian life were referred for treatment at a higher rate after the second screening.

"The study shows that the rates that we previously reported based on surveys taken immediately on return from deployment substantially underestimate the mental health burden," the study's authors reported.

Covell, 35, a former Army Reserve staff sergeant who now lives in Kaleva, said he is not surprised by the study's findings.

While recovering from his injuries, he created the Injured Soldiers Foundation to send disabled veterans on hunting, fishing and other outdoor trips. About 90 percent of the nearly 400 veterans helped by his foundation have symptoms of PTSD, Covell estimated.

Screening soldiers months after their return home is a good idea, he said, because "a lot of the guys don't want to talk about it."

His own struggles with PTSD began soon after he was injured with burns over 42 percent of his body.

"Even while I was in a coma, the doctor said I was having nightmares about being on fire," he said.

Three years after he was injured, he still suffers from PTSD.

"I'm learning to cope with it," Covell said.

Nov. 13 A3
Baghdad violence down sharply
AP
Rocket and mortar attacks have fallen to their lowest level in nearly two years. Civilian deaths have dropped sharply since summer. Shoppers are venturing out, even in Baghdad's most dangerous neighborhoods.

Iraq's capital is by no means yet safe. But the trend toward better security is indisputable.

In short, the traumatized residents of this sprawling city are experiencing their first sense of normalcy after years of bombings, kidnappings and wholesale slaughter. Iraqi officials are speaking optimistically about reopening streets and gradually lifting the nighttime curfew to encourage public confidence.

"The sound of an explosion has become a rare and extraordinary thing. Before it was normal," said Mohammed Mghamish, a 41-year-old father of six in the Shiite stronghold of Sadr City. "I am not worried like before."

The questions now: What caused the drop in violence? And how long can it last?

In one troubling sign, the security improvements have not been matched by any political agreements among Shiites and Sunnis. U.S. commanders are still hesitant to proclaim victory against Sunni and Shiite extremists in the city, and armed groups such as al-Qaida in Iraq, while bloodied, have not been destroyed.

Many people in Baghdad still fear venturing beyond their own neighborhoods. Others fear the influence of hardline religious parties that have gained power.

"Things are getting better, but for women the situation is the same," said Hiba Hussein, 30, a Sunni woman lawyer in northern Baghdad. "I was forced to wear a head scarf because of the Islamic attitudes on the street. Women have lost their freedom."

All that typifies the emerging picture in Iraq - a country that is less violent than a year ago, but still very far from the democratic ideal the United States once sought.

Still, today's calm is a far cry - and vast improvement - from the terror that gripped this city of 6 million people a year ago, as the country spiraled toward all-out sectarian civil war.

Then, armed bands of Shiite and Sunni gunmen roamed the streets, seizing people at illegal checkpoints and dumping their bodies by the dozens.

The sounds of car bombs, rocket and mortar fire reverberated through the streets. Iraqis, huddled in their homes, turning to Shiite militias and Sunni extremists to provide protection. Hundreds of thousands fled what amounted to ethnic cleansing.

Last December, 2,172 Iraqi civilians died violently, according to figures compiled by The Associated Press - most in Baghdad. But after a spike in June, violence in Baghdad began to ebb. In August, civilian deaths nationwide stood at 1,791, according to AP figures, and they fell to 878 in September and 750 in October.

As of Sunday, 189 civilians had died violently so far in November.
U.S. military deaths also are on the decline, although 2007 has been the deadliest year of the war for the U.S. military overall. After early spikes, deaths have fallen steadily from 101 in June to 65 in September and 39 in October. As of Monday, at least 16 U.S. service members have died so far this month.

In addition, the U.S. military says rocket and mortar attacks nationwide have fallen to their lowest level since February 2006. In Baghdad, such attacks rose from 139 in January to 224 in June - before falling to 53 last month.

"I think it has turned a corner," Gen. Richard Cody, vice chief of staff of the Army, told the AP on Monday. "These things take time, though ... We have to have patience ... Certainly the enemy has patience. We have to have patience."

The reasons for the violence drop are less clear.

U.S. commanders cite the surge of nearly 30,000 troops sent by President Bush earlier this year. They also cite a change in tactics, moving more troops out of large camps and into neighborhoods to keep extremists from returning.

"The surge gave us combat fire to reach out and touch the enemy," said Maj. Gen. Rick Lynch, commander of U.S. troops along Baghdad's southern rim. "We've denied the enemy those sanctuaries, and we couldn't have done that without the surge."

But the surge's success was also due to a revolt against al-Qaida by some Sunni Arabs - first in Anbar province and later in Baghdad. Fearing al-Qaida's brutal tactics, many fighters from rival insurgent groups such as the Islamic Army in Iraq began cooperating with U.S. forces to drive the extremists from their neighborhoods and villages.

In addition, many Sunnis came to feel that Shiite religious parties posed a greater threat to their long-term Sunni interests than did U.S. forces. In part, that calculation was driven by harsh facts: Shiite militias drove tens of thousands of Sunnis from their homes last year, often with the tacit approval of Shiite-led government forces.

At the same time, Shiite attitudes toward the Mahdi Army began to change. Gunmen were seen less as protectors than as thugs, whose criminal activity drew U.S. attacks. That prompted the head of the biggest militia, Muqtada al-Sadr, to order a six-month stand down in August.

U.S. commanders were quick to exploit the changes, organizing about 70,000 Sunni fighters into neighborhood watch groups and then working to integrate them into government forces.

"Now the (ex-insurgents) are providing the security," said Amir Mohammed, 47, a Sunni merchant in the western Baghdad neighborhood of Amariyah. "Shops are open until late at night. The living standard of the people in the area is lifted."

Yet the Shiite-led government has been leery of bringing its former enemies into the police and army, fearing Sunnis could turn against it once U.S. forces have gone.
Suspicion between Sunnis and Shiites runs deep - and could take years, if ever, to end.

Ahmed Kamil, 40, a teacher from Azamiyah, once a Sunni insurgent stronghold, typifies such continued fears.

"The people of Azamiyah were held responsible for the sectarian killings committed by gunmen in their area," Kamil said. "That is why I don't feel safe when I leave my area - just because I come from Azamiyah."

Nov. 14 A1
FBI: Blackwater killings unjustified
New York Times

Federal agents investigating the Sept. 16 episode in which Blackwater security personnel shot and killed 17 Iraqi civilians have found that at least 14 of the shootings were unjustified and violated deadly-force rules in effect for security contractors in Iraq, according to civilian and military officials briefed on the case.

The F.B.I. investigation into the shootings in Baghdad is still under way, but the findings, which indicate that the company’s employees recklessly used lethal force, are already under review by the Justice Department.

Prosecutors have yet to decide whether to seek indictments, and some officials have expressed pessimism that adequate criminal laws exist to enable them to charge any Blackwater employee with criminal wrongdoing. Spokesmen for the Justice Department and the F.B.I. declined to discuss the matter.

The case could be one of the first thorny issues to be decided by Michael B. Mukasey, who was sworn in as attorney general last week. He may be faced with a decision to turn down a prosecution on legal grounds at a time when a furor has erupted in Congress about the administration’s failure to hold security contractors accountable for their misdeeds.

Representative David E. Price, a North Carolina Democrat who has sponsored legislation to extend American criminal law to contractors serving overseas, said the Justice Department must hold someone accountable for the shootings.

“Just because there are deficiencies in the law, and there certainly are,” Mr. Price said, “that can’t serve as an excuse for criminal actions like this to be unpunished. I hope the new attorney general makes this case a top priority. He needs to announce to the American people and the world that we uphold the rule of law and we intend to pursue this.”

Investigators have concluded that as many as five of the company’s guards opened fire during the shootings, at least some with automatic weapons. Investigators have focused on one guard, identified as “turret gunner No. 3,” who fired a large number of rounds and was responsible for several fatalities.
Investigators found no evidence to support assertions by Blackwater employees that they were fired upon by Iraqi civilians. That finding sharply contradicts initial assertions by Blackwater officials, who said that company employees fired in self-defense and that three company vehicles were damaged by gunfire.

Government officials said the shooting occurred when security guards fired in response to gunfire by other members of their unit in the mistaken belief that they were under attack. One official said, “I wouldn’t call it a massacre, but to say it was unwarranted is an understatement.”

Among the 17 killings, three may have been justified under rules that allow lethal force to be used in response to an imminent threat, the F.B.I. agents have concluded. They concluded that Blackwater guards might have perceived a threat when they opened fire on a white Kia sedan that moved toward Nisour Square after traffic had been stopped for a Blackwater convoy of four armored vehicles.

Two people were killed in the car, Ahmed Haithem Ahmed and his mother, Mohassin, a physician. Relatives said they were on a family errand and posed no threat to the Blackwater convoy.

Investigators said Blackwater guards might have felt endangered by a third, and unidentified, Iraqi who was killed nearby. But the investigators determined that the subsequent shootings of 14 Iraqis, some of whom were shot while fleeing the scene, were unprovoked.

**Under the firearms policy governing all State Department employees and contractors, lethal force may be used “only in response to an imminent threat of deadly force or serious physical injury against the individual, those under the protection of the individual or other individuals.”**

A separate military review of the Sept. 16 shootings concluded that all of the killings were unjustified and potentially criminal. One of the military investigators said the F.B.I. was being generous to Blackwater in characterizing any of the killings as justifiable.

Anne E. Tyrrell, a Blackwater spokeswoman, said she would have no comment until the F.B.I. released its findings.

Although investigators are confident of their overall findings, they have been frustrated by problems with evidence that hampered their inquiry. Investigators who arrived more than two weeks after the shooting could not reconstruct the crime scene, a routine step in shooting inquiries in the United States.

**Even the total number of fatalities remains uncertain because of the difficulty of piecing together what happened in a chaotic half-hour in a busy square.** Moreover, investigators could not rely on videotapes or photographs of the scene, because they were unsure whether bodies or vehicles might have been moved.
Bodies of a number of victims could not be recovered. Metal shell casings recovered from the intersection could not be definitively tied to the shootings because, as one official described it, “The city is littered with brass.”

In addition, investigators did not have access to statements taken from Blackwater employees, who had given statements to State Department investigators on the condition that their statements would not be used in any criminal investigation like the one being conducted by the F.B.I.

An earlier case involving Blackwater points to the difficulty the Department of Justice may be facing in deciding whether and how to bring charges in relation to the Sept. 16 shootings. A Blackwater guard, Andrew J. Moonen, is the sole suspect in the shooting on Dec. 24 of a bodyguard to an Iraqi vice president.

Investigators have statements by witnesses, forensic evidence, the weapon involved and a detailed chronology of the events drawn up by military personnel and contractor employees.

But nearly 11 months later, no charges have been brought, and officials said a number of theories had been debated among prosecutors in Washington and Seattle without a resolution of how to proceed in the case.

Mr. Moonen’s lawyer, Stewart P. Riley of Seattle, said he had had no discussions about the case with federal prosecutors.

Some lawmakers and legal scholars said the Sept. 16 case dramatized the need to clarify the law governing private armed contractors in a war zone. Workers under contract to the Defense Department are subject to the Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act, or MEJA, but many, including top State Department officials, contend that the law does not apply to companies like Blackwater that work under contract to other government agencies, including the State Department.

Representative Price’s bill would extend the MEJA legislation to all contractors operating in war zones. The bill passed the house 389 to 30 last month and is now before the Senate.

He said it cannot be applied retroactively to the Sept. 16 case, but he said that the guards who killed the Iraqis must be brought to justice, under the War Crimes Act or some other law.

**Nov. 15 A4**

**Iraqi pols making US enemies**

**Washington Post**

Senior military commanders here now portray the intransigence of Iraq's Shiite-dominated government as the key threat facing the U.S. effort in Iraq, rather than al-Qaida terrorists, Sunni
insurgents or Iranian-backed militias.

In more than a dozen interviews, U.S. military officials expressed growing concern over the Iraqi government's failure to capitalize on sharp declines in attacks against U.S. troops and Iraqi civilians.

A window of opportunity has opened for the government to reach out to its former foes, said Army Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno, commander of day-to-day U.S. military operations in Iraq, but "it's unclear how long that window is going to be open."

The lack of political progress calls into question the core rationale behind the troop buildup President Bush announced in January: that improved security would create space for Iraqis to arrive at new power-sharing arrangements. And what if there is no such breakthrough by next summer? "If that doesn't happen," said Odierno, "we're going to have to review our strategy."

Brig. Gen. John Campbell, deputy commanding general of the Texas-based 1st Cavalry Division, complained last week that Iraqi politicians appear out of touch with everyday citizens. "The ministers, they don't get out," he said. "They don't know what the hell is going on on the ground."

Campbell noted approvingly that Lt. Gen. Aboud Qanbar, the top Iraqi commander in the Baghdad security offensive, lately has begun escorting Cabinet officials involved in health, housing, oil and other issues out of the Green Zone to show them, as Campbell put it, "Hey, I got the security, bring in the (expletive) essential services."

Some U.S. Army officers now talk more sympathetically about former insurgents than they do about the government.

"It is painful, very painful," dealing with the obstructionism of Iraqi officials, said Army Lt. Col. Mark Fetter. As for the Sunnis who for years fought U.S. soldiers and now want to join the police, Fetter shrugged.

"They have got to eat," he said. "There are so many we've detained and interrogated that did what they did for money."

**Nov. 15 A4**

**Bush slams exit bill**

AP

House Democrats pushed through a $50 billion bill for the Iraq war Wednesday night that would require President Bush to start bringing troops home in coming weeks with a goal of ending combat by December 2008.

The legislation, passed 218-203, was largely a symbolic jab at Bush, who already has begun reducing force levels but opposes a congressionally mandated timetable on the war. And while the measure was unlikely to pass in the Senate - let alone overcome a presidential veto -
Democrats said they wanted voters to know they weren't giving up.

“The fact is, we can no longer sustain the military deployment in Iraq,” said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. “Staying there in the manner that we are there is no longer an option.”

The White House pledged to veto the bill, and Republicans said they would back the president.

“These votes, like the dozens of previous failed votes, put the interests of radical interest groups ahead of the needs of our military and their mission,” an administration statement said.

The bill represents about a quarter of the $196 billion Bush requested for combat operations in the 2008 budget year, which began Oct 1.

It would compel an unspecified number of troops to leave Iraq within 30 days, a requirement Bush is already on track to meet as he begins in coming weeks to reverse the 30,000 troop buildup he ordered earlier this year. It also sets a goal of ending combat by Dec. 15, 2008, and states that money included in the bill should be used to redeploy troops and “not to extend or prolong the war.”

The measure also would set government-wide standards on interrogation, effectively barring the CIA from using such harsh techniques as waterboarding, which simulates drowning.

The bill was on shaky ground this week, after some liberal Democrats said they were concerned it was too soft and would not force Bush to end the war. Conservative Democrats said they thought it went too far and would tie the hands of military commanders.

The bill's prospects brightened somewhat after three leading anti-war Democrats announced they would support it. California Reps. Lynn Woolsey, Barbara Lee and Maxine Waters said they had agreed to swing behind it because the bill explicitly states the money should be used to bring troops home.

But still uncertain the bill would pass, Pelosi on Wednesday delayed a vote by several hours while she met with supporters and asked them to help her round up votes.

Fifteen Democrats broke ranks and joined 188 Republicans in opposing the measure. Four Republicans joined 214 Democrats in supporting it.

Republicans fought bitterly against the timetable in the bill, as well as the restrictions on interrogations. Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio, his party's leader, said the bill would lead to “nothing other than failure.”

Hours before the scheduled vote, the White House dispatched Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Capitol Hill to brief lawmakers on Iraq.
In one closed-door meeting, Gates urged a group of senators not to support the bill. He said the same lawmakers who criticized Pentagon civilians for previously ignoring the advice of its uniformed generals were asking him to ignore them now, according to an official who attended the meeting. The official requested anonymity because the meeting was private.

Similar legislation has passed repeatedly along party lines in the House only to sink in the Senate, where Democrats hold a razor-thin majority and 60 votes are needed to overcome procedural hurdles.

It is expected that if the measure fails in the Senate, Democrats will not consider Bush’s war spending request until next year. Democrats say the military won't need the money until then and the Pentagon can transfer money from less urgent accounts or from spending set aside for the last three months of this year.

The Pentagon says moving money around is a bureaucratic nightmare that costs more in the long run. And if taken to the extreme, the military would eventually have to freeze contracts or lay off civilian workers to ensure troops in combat have what they need.

In another provision that drew White House opposition, the House bill would require that all government interrogators rely on the Army Field Manual. The manual is based on Geneva Convention standards and was updated in 2006 to specifically prohibit the military from using aggressive interrogation techniques, such as waterboarding.

The White House said in its statement that the Geneva Conventions shouldn't apply to “captured terrorists who openly flout that law.”

The bill also would require the president to certify to Congress 15 days in advance that a unit being sent into combat is “fully mission capable,” although Bush could waive that requirement if necessary.

Nov. 17 A9
Senate split on Iraq war spending
AP

Nearly a year after anti-war voters put them in power, congressional Democrats remain unable to pass legislation ordering troops home from Iraq. Frustrated by Republican roadblocks, Democrats now plan to sit on President Bush's $196 billion request for war spending until next year - pushing the Pentagon toward an accounting nightmare and deepening their conflict with the White House on the war.

"We're going to continue to do the right thing for the American people by having limited accountability for the president and not a blank check," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev.
Senate Republicans on Friday blocked a $50 billion bill by Democrats that would have paid for several months of combat but also would have ordered troop withdrawals from Iraq to begin within 30 days. The measure, narrowly passed this week by the House, also would have set a goal of ending combat in December 2008.

The 53-45 vote was seven votes short of the 60 needed to advance. It came minutes after the Senate rejected a Republican proposal to pay for the Iraq war with no strings attached.

Now, Democratic leaders say they won't send President Bush a war spending bill this year. They calculate the military has enough money to run through mid-February.

Responding to the congressional blockage, Defense Secretary Robert Gates on Friday signed a memo ordering the Army to begin planning for a series of expected cutbacks, including the layoffs of as many as 100,000 civilian employees and another 100,000 civilian contractors, starting as early as January, Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell said.

"The memo reflects the urgency of the situation we find ourselves in - we are in a real crisis," Morrell said, noting that layoff notices to some civilian employees would have to be sent as early as mid-December. He decried Congress' refusal thus far to provide the money needed to continue fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, accusing lawmakers of "holding hostage the well-being of our men and women in uniform, and our national security."

The delay will satisfy a Democratic support base that is fiercely anti-war. But it also will give Republicans and the White House ample time to hammer Democrats for leaving for the holidays without funding the troops.

"We ought to get the troops the funding they need to finish the mission without restrictions and without a surrender date," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

At the White House on Friday, deputy press secretary Tony Fratto said the spending gap is unjustified.

"We'd rather see the Department of Defense, the military planners and our troops focusing on military maneuvers rather than accounting maneuvers as they carry out their mission in the field," Fratto said.

Since taking the reins of Congress in January, Democrats have struggled to pass any significant anti-war legislation. Measures that passed along party lines in the House repeatedly sank in the Senate, where Democrats hold a much narrower majority and 60 votes are routinely needed to overcome procedural hurdles.

In May, Republicans agreed not to stand in the way of a $95 billion bill that would have set
a timetable for troop withdrawals. Bush rejected the measure and Democrats lacked the two-thirds majority needed to override the veto, as Republicans anticipated.

Democrats eventually stripped the timetable from the bill and sent Bush the money without restrictions on force levels. The move was an unpopular one with many Democratic voters who say Congress should cut off money for the war.

As the year progressed, Democrats hoped for Republican defections. But a drop in violence this fall in Iraq helped to shore up GOP support for the war.

On Friday, only four Republicans joined Democrats in voting for the Iraq measure: Sens. Gordon Smith of Oregon, Olympia Snowe of Maine, Susan Collins of Maine and Chuck Hagel of Nebraska.

Sen. Christopher Dodd was the lone Democrat opposing it because he said it did not go far enough to end the war. Other Democrats, including Sen. Russ Feingold of Wisconsin, said they too opposed the bill as too soft but that they supported advancing debate.

"The only way to end the war is with a firm deadline that is enforceable through funding," said Dodd, D-Conn.

Democrats acknowledge recent progress made by the military in Iraq but contend the security will be short-lived unless the Iraqi government reaches a political settlement.

"We need to do more than say to the Iraqis that our patience has run out and that they need to seize the opportunity that has been given them," said Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich. "Their dawdling will only end when they have no choice."

Republicans on Friday tried to counter with an alternative proposal that would have paid $70 billion toward the war without restrictions. That measure failed by a vote of 45-53, falling 15 short of the 60 needed to advance.

Republicans said there were appalled by Sen. Chuck Schumer's comment, reported by The Associated Press on Thursday, that the Bush administration wouldn't get a "free lunch."

Schumer, D-N.Y., had told reporters that unless Bush accepted the restrictions, the Defense Department would have to eat into its core budget.

"The days of a free lunch are over," he said.

Republican National Committee Chairman Mike Duncan said Schumer's comments were "unbelievable," and Rep. Heather Wilson said the senator should apologize to the troops.
"Sen. Schumer only wants to fund pay, body armor and chow for the troops if he can put conditions on the money so that they cannot do the mission they have been ordered to do," said Wilson, R-N.M.

The Pentagon confirms the military will not run out of money until mid February, after which all Army bases would cease operations.

Nov. 18 A14
Blackwater probe reveals family ties – and feuds
The New York Times

They were smart, scrappy brothers who rose from modest circumstances in Baltimore to become lacrosse stars at Princeton, succeed in business and land big government jobs.

Now the Krongard brothers — who have carried childhood nicknames, Buzzy and Cookie, through long careers — are tied up in the tangled story of Blackwater, the security contractor accused in the deaths of at least 17 Iraqis while guarding a State Department convoy in Baghdad.

The shorthand version boils their involvement down to that Washington catchall conflict of interest. The full story appears more complicated, less about cozy nepotism than about family estrangement.

But the concern about a conflict resulted Friday in the resignation of Alvin B. Krongard — Buzzy — from the Blackwater advisory board he had just joined. The company said he hoped to defuse accusations that his ties to the company were causing Howard J. Krongard — Cookie — the State Department inspector general, to go easy on Blackwater.

Alvin Krongard, 71, who left a $4 million-a-year job in investment banking to serve in top posts at the Central Intelligence Agency from 1998 to 2004, played what he describes as a routine role as an intermediary in helping Blackwater get its first big security contract from the agency for guards in Afghanistan in 2002.

A martial arts enthusiast and former Marine who has regaled friends with tales of punching a great white shark while scuba diving, Mr. Krongard said he later became friendly with the company’s founder, Erik D. Prince. They have hunted near Blackwater’s North Carolina training ground and at Mr. Krongard’s hunting club in Maryland.

Meanwhile, Howard Krongard, 66, a former general counsel at the accounting firm of Deloitte & Touche who took the State Department job in 2005, was grilled this week by House Democrats. They accused Mr. Krongard (who does not use his nickname professionally, as his brother does) of alienating his staff and improperly interfering in investigations, including a Justice Department inquiry into allegations of weapons smuggling by Blackwater employees.

Hence Representative Henry A. Waxman’s disclosure at a hearing Wednesday, the latest in a string of revelations the California Democrat has used to torment the Bush administration.
“We have now learned that Mr. Krongard’s brother, Buzzy Krongard, serves on Blackwater’s advisory board,” Mr. Waxman declared, saying the inspector general had “concealed this apparent conflict of interest.”

Howard Krongard grew indignant, saying his brother had no ties to Blackwater.

“When these ugly rumors started recently, I specifically asked him,” he said. “I do not believe it is true that he is a member of the advisory board.”

Then came a break, and Howard phoned his older brother. Buzzy told Howard he had just returned from his first Blackwater advisory board meeting in Williamsburg, Va.

A chagrined Howard Krongard returned to the witness stand. “I want to state on the record right now that I hereby recuse myself from any matters having to do with Blackwater,” he said.

Howard Krongard has also disqualified himself from an inquiry into the construction of the American Embassy in Baghdad, and subordinates have lambasted him for what they called abusive and erratic conduct. John A. DeDonia, Howard’s assistant for investigations until August, said in an interview that he believed top State Department officials had influenced the inspector general to back away from tough investigations, including that of Blackwater, which diplomats depend on for protection in Iraq under a $1.2 billion contract.

At the hearing, Howard Krongard, who did not respond to a request for an interview for this article, described himself as an apolitical auditing lawyer whose reforms have met resistance from subordinates who resent supervision. “I want to say in the strongest terms that I have never impeded any investigation,” he told the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

From a distance, events might suggest that Mr. Prince chose to recruit Buzzy Krongard to curry favor with Howard Krongard and blunt any inquiry into Blackwater. But if that was Mr. Prince’s strategy, his intelligence was gravely flawed, according to people who know the family.

The Krongard brothers barely speak, friends say. In fact, Howard appears to be estranged from several family members, including his son Kenneth, whom he sued last year over a home loan. And Buzzy Krongard has said that when Howard called him a few weeks ago as he prepared his testimony, it was their first conversation in months.

Even their accounts of that brief call are at odds: Buzzy says that he told Howard he was joining the Blackwater advisory board, and that Howard said that was not a good idea. Howard testified that they had no such discussion.

Still, Buzzy Krongard said in an interview, “Whatever issues I have with my brother, I don’t question his integrity.” Given their estrangement, any attempt to reach Howard through him would have backfired, he said. “Based on our recent relationship,” he said, “the effect would be the other way around.”

Buzzy Krongard spoke in his 15,000-square-foot Georgian mansion, Torch Hill, north of
Baltimore, where family photos were propped atop an antique piano and memorabilia of his lacrosse days covered half a den wall.

The two brothers grew up in a middle-class West Baltimore neighborhood, sons of a partner in a uniform-manufacturing business. Buzzy’s nickname was bestowed by an aunt who thought he resembled a comics character by that name; a few years later, when his grandmother wanted to buy him a war bond, she had to ask his parents his formal name. Howard got his nickname from knocking on doors and asking for cookies, his brother said.

They went to public school and on to Princeton, and their athletic exploits — Buzzy as a midfielder, Cookie as a goalie — landed both men in the National Lacrosse Hall of Fame in Baltimore.

“Most people around here started to play lacrosse at 7 or 8,” said Ralph N. Willis, 76, another Hall of Famer from Baltimore and Princeton. “Buzzy and I used to play with those old wooden sticks.”

After rising to the helm of Alex. Brown & Sons, the venerable Baltimore investment banking firm, Buzzy Krongard oversaw its acquisition by Bankers Trust in 1997 and left the next year for the C.I.A., as a counselor to George J. Tenet, then the director of central intelligence. He became executive director, the No. 3 post, in 2001 and helped design the agency’s secret detention program after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Mr. Krongard said he visited Blackwater’s training facilities for C.I.A. officers but did not meet Mr. Prince until early 2002, shortly after a visit to the agency’s quarters at a hotel in Kabul, Afghanistan. Mr. Krongard said he told the Blackwater chief, who was making the rounds at the C.I.A.’s headquarters in Virginia to drum up business, of his worries about the reliability of Afghan perimeter guards.

“I just thought, ‘Here’s a guy who says he can get highly skilled special operations types over there in a hurry to help with security,’” Mr. Krongard recalled. He said he connected Mr. Prince with the proper C.I.A. officials to discuss a contract but neither then nor later exerted pressure on the company’s behalf.

Buzzy Krongard vigorously defends Blackwater’s record in Iraq. “It’s very easy to second-guess them when you’re sitting back in an air-conditioned office,” he said. After Mr. Krongard’s resignation from the Blackwater board was announced late Friday, Mr. Prince expressed his dismay at the politically charged maelstrom around the company.

“It’s a real shame in this country when honorable men and private companies are presumed guilty based on politicized allegations, even while investigations are under way,” Mr. Prince said.

But Mr. Waxman seems disinclined to back down. He announced Friday that in light of the discrepancy between the brothers’ statements, he plans to call both to a hearing after Thanksgiving to sort it out.
“The information from Buzzy Krongard,” Mr. Waxman wrote to other committee members, “raises serious questions about the veracity of Howard Krongard’s testimony before the committee.”

Nov. 20 A3
Violence in Iraq declines, moves north
Press Wire Service

Despite a decline in violence in Iraq, northern Iraq has become more violent than other regions as al-Qaida and other militants move there to avoid coalition operations elsewhere, the region's top U.S. commander said Monday.

Army Maj. Gen. Mark P. Hertling said al-Qaida cells still operate in all the key cities in the north. "What you're seeing is the enemy shifting," Hertling told Pentagon reporters in a video conference from outside Tikrit in northern Iraq.

Hertling said militants have been pushed east to his area from Anbar by the so-called Awakening movement, in which local tribes have allied with the coalition against al-Qaida. Others have been pushed north to his area from the Baghdad region, where this year's U.S. troops escalation has made more operations possible.

"The attacks are still much higher than I would like here in the north, but they are continuing to decrease in numbers and scale of attacks," he said.

Hertling said 1,830 roadside bombs were placed in his region in June, compared with 900 last month.

The U.S. military says overall attacks in Iraq have fallen 55 percent since nearly 30,000 additional American troops arrived in Iraq by June, and some areas are experiencing their lowest levels of violence since the summer of 2005.

Meanwhile, a showdown appeared to loom over foreign security companies’ immunity from prosecution in Iraq as authorities arrested 43 people after guards protecting a convoy in Baghdad shot and wounded a woman Monday.

The incident was relatively minor compared with recent shootings; The worst, involving guards working for Blackwater USA, left 17 Iraqis dead in September.

The company involved in the latest incident, Almco, is based in Dubai and has contracts with the pentagon to provide some bases with essentials such as food, water, and tents, the military said.

In each incident, witnesses said the shootings were unjustified, but guards said they fired after perceiving they were under threat of attack.
In Washington, federal authorities have convened a grand jury to investigate the contractor shootings, according to sources familiar with the probe.

**Nov. 21  B2**
**Concerns over missing soldiers mars homecoming**
**AP**

With two of their own still missing six months after they were captured by insurgents, the welcome-back ceremony Tuesday for the 10th Mountain Division's 2nd Brigade was more a somber observance than a joyous celebration.

Nearly 1,000 soldiers and a few dozen family members packed into Fort Drum's Magrath Gym to pay tribute to the 2nd Brigade, which completed its third combat tour when it turned over its duties in Iraq's "Triangle of Death" to the 101st Airborne Division earlier this month. When it left Iraq, the 2nd Brigade had served more battlefield time than any other Army unit since war began in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The homecoming came just days after the Army intensified its search for Spc. Alex Jimenez, 25, of Lawrence, Mass., and Pvt. Byron Fouty, 19, of Waterford, Mich., with U.S. and Iraqi soldiers going house-to-house after a dramatic pre-dawn air assault into two villages southwest of Baghdad.

The parents of both soldiers attended the 45-minute homecoming ceremony.
"It was important to be here," Ramon "Andy" Jimenez said through a Spanish language translator. "I came to see the soldiers who served with my son ... and to thank all the soldiers who searched for him and Byron."

Jimenez said his emotions were mixed. "I'm happy all these soldiers have come back. But I'm sad that Alex and Byron are not among them," said Jimenez, who wore a lanyard with a photo of his son and Fouty and the words, "Together they will come home."

Gordon Dibler Jr., Fouty's stepfather, described the ceremony similarly. "When they started recognizing the wounded soldiers, that's when I felt it most. It was so powerful," said Dibler, of Oxford, Mich.

Jimenez and Fouty were seized May 12 when their unit was attacked and overrun while watching for insurgents placing roadside bombs on a dangerous road south of Baghdad.
A third soldier, Pfc. Joseph Anzack Jr., was also captured. His body was found May 23 floating in the Euphrates River. Four U.S. soldiers and an Iraqi translator were killed during the attack.

**Insurgents claimed in a video posted on the Internet that all three missing soldiers were killed and buried. The militants showed images of the military IDs belonging to Fouty and Jimenez, but offered no proof they were dead.**

**In June, soldiers discovered the soldiers' identification cards and personal items at an al-**
Qaida safe house more than 100 miles from where they disappeared. The brigade's commander said there has been conflicting intelligence about the soldiers' fate.

Both fathers said they remained optimistic not only that their sons will be found, but they will be found alive.

"There's no evidence they are dead. Most times when they kill people, the insurgents show photos of them being killed or dead. There's no photos so I'm still hopeful," Jimenez said.

About 3,500 2nd Brigade soldiers deployed to south Baghdad in August 2006 to provide security and train Iraqi soldiers and police. The 2nd Brigade has now served a total of 40 months in Iraq over its three combat tours. The brigade's deployment was extended by three months half way through its original 12-month tour.

During the unit's deployment, 52 soldiers were killed and another 271 wounded. Spc. Tommy Langseth suffered head wounds from an IED explosion while on patrol searching for the kidnapped soldiers about three weeks after their disappearance. The blast killed his squad leader.

"It's been overwhelming to see all the guys back, especially when they received a standing ovation," said Langseth, 21, of Brady, Texas.

"But not coming back without those two ... it's always going to be tough. There's no closure until they're found," Langseth said, adding, "But I know for sure we're not going to give up looking for them until we can bring them home, too."

"It's disappointing that we didn't find them ourselves," echoed Sgt. Paul Adkins, a 44-year-old chief intelligence officer from Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "But I'm confident that the next brigade will do their best to find them. I know it was stressed heavily when we were transferring duties over — recover our soldiers and capture the perpetrators, or bring about their demise."

Division commander Maj. Gen. Michael Oates said what the brigade accomplished during its most recent tour in Iraq was "nothing short of remarkable."

"The results speak for themselves. While the area remains dangerous, the level of violence is a fraction of when they arrived, al-Qaida is disrupted, the Iraqi security forces are greatly improved and the local citizenry has returned to a more normal daily life, free from the insidious violence of a year ago," Oates said.

He, too, pledged the Army would not stop looking for Jimenez and Fouty until their fate is known.

Nov. 22 A12
Ray gun soon to be ready for Iraq duty
There's no doubt this oversized ray gun can deliver the heat. The question is, how soon can the weapon, which neither kills nor maims, be delivered to Iraq?

At a rain-soaked demonstration of the crowd-dispersal tool here Thursday, military officials said one could be deployed early next year. But others still need to be built and undergo more testing before being shipped, a slow-going process at odds with urgent demands from U.S. commanders for the device.

What the troops may see as needless delays, Pentagon officials view as necessary steps toward fielding a weapon never used before in combat. The device, known as the Active Denial System, uses energy beams instead of bullets and lets soldiers break up unruly crowds without guns.

That means fewer civilian casualties, a key ingredient to success in Iraq.

"We've been perfecting the art of the lethal since Cain and Abel," said Marine Corps Col. Kirk Hymes, director of the Defense Department's Joint Non-Lethal Weapons Directorate.

The goal now, he said, is to provide U.S. troops in hostile environments with a way to respond that is more potent than shouting but less final than shooting. To do so in a package that is safe, mobile and sturdy enough to withstand the rigors of combat shouldn't be rushed.

"We don't want to hand the operating forces a science project," Hymes said.

The denial system just completed a lengthy demonstration phase and is expected to receive a $25 million boost once Congress approves an Iraq war supplemental spending bill. The money will be used to buy five "Silent Guardians," a commercial version of the denial system built by Waltham, Mass.-based defense contractor Raytheon Co.

"The systems themselves could be manufactured more than likely within 12 months if everything goes according to what Raytheon tells us," Hymes said.

An existing test unit, known as System 2, sits on a flatbed truck and will be the first to go to Iraq.

While delivery schedules might be murky, there's no denying the system's punch. To be hit by the invisible beam is to feel the intense heat of a suddenly opened furnace. The instant reaction is to move. Fast.

At Quantico, a Marine Corps base south of Washington, a test unit mounted on a Humvee stung reporters and military personnel who volunteered to enter a circle marked off by orange traffic cones.

The system is a directed-energy device, although not a laser or a microwave. It uses a large, dish-shaped antenna and a long, V-shaped arm to send an invisible beam of waves to a target as far
away as 500 yards.

With the unit mounted on the back of a vehicle, U.S. troops can operate a safe distance from rocks, Molotov cocktails and small-arms fire.

The beam penetrates the skin slightly, just enough to cause intense pain. The beam goes through clothing as well as windows, but can be blocked by thicker materials, such as metal, wood or concrete.

Hymes said hiding behind a car or a sheet of plywood might temporarily protect a person. But in doing so, potential combatants "effectively render themselves immobile trying to get out of the way," he said.

The most determined volunteer lasted only a few seconds Thursday. The stinging was done by Senior Airman Robert Hudspeth, a 21-year-old senior airman from Florida. Sitting in the Humvee nearly 800 yards away from the circle, Hudspeth used a joy stick and a computer screen to send the beam on its way.

"It's pretty simple to use," said Hudspeth, who's been training on the denial system for the past three months. "You control everything from this computer."

There's been no shortage of commanders asking for the tool.

In August 2003, Richard Natonski, a Marine Corps brigadier general who had just returned from Iraq, filed an "urgent" request with officials in Washington for the energy-beam device.

A year later, Natonski, by then promoted to major general, again asked for the system, saying a compact and mobile version was "urgently needed," particularly in urban settings.

In October 2004, the commander of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force "enthusiastically" endorsed Natonski's request. Lt. Gen. James Amos said it was "critical" for Marines in Iraq to have the system.

American commanders in Iraq also have asked to buy Raytheon's device.


Neller, then the deputy commander of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force in Iraq, called the lack of such a non-lethal weapon a "chronic deficiency" that "will continue to harm" efforts to resolve showdowns with as little firepower as possible.

**Nov. 24 A7**

*Pet market bombings kill 28*
Two bombs exploded hours apart Friday in a central Baghdad pet market and a police checkpoint in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, killing 26 people and wounding dozens, officials said.

The attacks were among the deadliest in recent weeks, underscoring warnings by senior U.S. commanders that extremists still pose a threat to Iraq's fragile security despite a downturn in violence since a U.S.-Iraqi security plan began in mid-February.

The blast in the capital's popular weekly al-Ghazl animal bazaar occurred just before 9 a.m., shattering the festive atmosphere as people strolled past the stalls.

At least 13 people were killed and nearly 60 wounded, including four policemen, according to police and hospital officials. Several shops also were damaged.

About 1:30 p.m. in Mosul, a suicide car bomber struck a police checkpoint, killing three policemen and 10 civilians, said police Brig. Gen. Mohammed al-Wakaa.

The al-Ghazl market, where sellers peddle birds, dogs, cats, sheep, goats and exotic animals such as snakes and monkeys, has been targeted in the past. On Jan. 26, 15 people were killed when a bomb hidden in a box of pigeons exploded as shoppers gathered around it.

Friday's blast was particularly significant because it dealt a blow to an increased feeling of confidence among Iraqis about the recent calm in the capital and surrounding areas.

Brig. Gen. Qassim al-Moussawi, the Iraqi military spokesman for Baghdad, said the explosives were hidden in a box carrying pigeons and other small birds.

"The security situation is moving in the right direction toward the better, but there are still pockets that make use of such opportunities as the presence of different kinds of animals and birds to carry out the ugliest crimes," he told Iraqi state television.

The market has regained popularity after the lifting of a four-hour Friday driving ban to protect prayer services from car bombings. The Iraqi government lifted the weekly ban in September, citing the improving security situation.

A local storeowner who would only give his name as Abu Zainab said he had only reopened his business two weeks ago.

"I was reluctant to open it after lifting the curfew because of security concerns," he said of his cleaning supply store that is about 150 yards from the blast site.

"Today, the view of many young men coming with pets, colorful fish in aquariums and dogs was very encouraging and cheerful," he said. "There were also teenagers selling sandwiches and tea in wheeled carts giving the impression that life is back to normal again, but about 9 o'clock, we heard the sound of an explosion."
He described a scene of chaos, with birds flying through smoke as the bodies of young men who had been killed and wounded lay on the ground.

"We helped evacuate some of them, then the Iraqi police and army came and told us to leave because they feared another explosion could take place," he said.

Amir Aziz, a 22-year-old pigeon vendor who was wounded by shrapnel, said he was in the middle of a transaction when the blast occurred.

"Today, the market was very crowded and we were happy about that," he said. "The Iraqi security officials have deceived us by their statements that the situation is 80 percent better. People believed them and began to go out thinking that it would be safe. I think that the situation will become worse again."

In other violence, a parked car bomb targeted a police patrol in Shurqat, 155 miles northwest of Baghdad, killing one officer and wounding 15 others, along with one civilian, authorities said.

The U.S. military also said a mortar attack late Thursday struck the base in Balad, 50 miles north of Baghdad, killing one Iraqi and wounding two. There were no coalition casualties.

The top U.S. commander in northern Iraq, Army Maj. Gen. Mark P. Hertling, warned earlier this month that northern Iraq has become more violent than other regions as al-Qaida and other militants move there to avoid military operations elsewhere.

On Friday, U.S. troops detained seven suspects in three coordinated raids against al-Qaida in Iraq's media network southeast of the northern city of Samarra, the military said.


U.S. officials say attacks have dropped 55 percent nationwide since June. But American military commanders repeatedly have warned that Iraq is by no means stable, even though the violence is declining.

Al-Moussawi also urged Iraqis to be patient, insisting that U.S. and Iraqi forces were gaining the upper hand but "pockets of terrorists" still exist.

"Thank God that our people are still challenging the circumstances and they have broken the barrier of fear," he said. "The people have to stay alert and continue cooperating with us so as not to give the terrorists any opportunities to carry out such cowardly operations."

In another development, the Iraqi government said 31 South Asian workers detained after a shooting involving foreign security guards face charges of illegally entering the country.
Government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh told The Associated Press that the 21 Sri Lankans, nine Nepalese and one Indian would appear before a magistrate Sunday.

"We call upon all companies operating in Iraq to register and settle the status of the foreign employees," he said. "The companies should make sure that their workers have official visas from Iraqi authorities."

The workers were picked up Tuesday after police said the security guards protecting their convoy opened fire in Baghdad’s Karradah district, wounding a woman. Two Fijian and 10 Iraqi security guards are under investigation for assault.

**Nov. 24 A8**
**Troops to do more training**
**New York Times**

With violence in Iraq on the decline and a quarter of American combat brigades scheduled to leave by July, commanders plan to give the remaining brigades an expanded role in training and supporting Iraqi forces, according to officials involved in a confidential military review of the next phase of the American troop deployment.

The plan, not yet in final form, is intended to transfer more of the security burden in Iraq to the Iraqis without giving up the gains that the Americans have made in recent months in pacifying the most violent areas and weakening the Sunni insurgency.

The approach is strikingly different from the plans advocated by many United States politicians, including some Democratic presidential contenders, who have called for a rapid withdrawal of American combat brigades from Iraq — the very units that American commanders see as playing a central role in the transition toward Iraqi control.

It is intended to supplement the longstanding American efforts to recruit, equip and advise Iraqi forces by strengthening their ability to deal with a diverse array of threats. The plan also reflects the vision of American commanders of the evolving role of American combat units after President Bush’s troop reinforcement plan runs its course next summer.

Under the approach, some American combat brigades due to stay behind would slim down their fighting forces and enlarge the teams mentoring Iraqis. Within a 3,000-member brigade, for example, one or two battalions might help train the Iraqis while the rest would be retained as quick-reaction forces to back up the Iraqis if they ran into stiff resistance.

The precise arrangements would vary depending on the threats and the quality of Iraqi forces in specific regions, and brigade commanders would have considerable leeway in deciding how many soldiers to commit to mentoring. But the shift toward training would be gradual, reflecting what commanders say have been lessons learned from the failure of earlier, overhasty efforts to transfer responsibility to the Iraqis.
Even after President Bush’s “surge” of troops is over in mid-July and the number of brigades shrinks to 15 from the current level of 20, American units in some of the more highly contested areas would continue their combat roles. That is based on an assessment that the situation in Iraq is too uncertain and the Iraqi security forces in many areas too unsteady for an abrupt transfer of responsibilities.

The proposal for a new mix of forces is part of a broad review of the projected American military posture in Iraq for a phase that would begin in the second part of 2008. No final decisions have been made on the pace of further reductions or the details of how the plan would be carried out in Iraq. Gen. David H. Petraeus, the senior American commander in Iraq, has told Congress that he will not issue new recommendations until March after an assessment of conditions. The basic approach, however, has begun to emerge.

“The White House has been informed conceptually,” said one senior Bush administration official, referring to planning. “Fundamentally, this concept is not going to change.”

Transferring security to the Iraqis was at the core of the initial United States strategy in Iraq. Gen. George W. Casey Jr., General Petraeus’s predecessor as Iraq commander, voiced optimism last year that the Iraqi military and police might be just 12 to 18 months from assuming the main responsibility.

But efforts to quickly transfer authority often backfired. In Diyala Province, for example, Iraqi Army commanders carried out a sectarian agenda, detaining local Sunni leaders whom American commanders were trying to engage, and failing to curb the inroads made by Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, a largely Iraqi insurgent group that American intelligence officials say has foreign leadership. After much of Baquba, the provincial capital, fell under insurgent control, the American military was forced to mount an offensive in June to reclaim the city.

American military officials assert that the situation has changed, which may make it easier for the Iraqi forces to assume more of a security role. Partly as a result of the American troop reinforcements and a new counterinsurgency strategy, violence has subsided, making security more manageable. Many Sunnis now reject Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, and thousands have volunteered in local neighborhood watch organizations.

In addition, the Iraqi military is expanding. It is creating three new divisions, including the 11th Iraqi Army Division to be established in Baghdad over the next several months. That unit will enable nine battalions sent to the capital from other regions to return home, strengthening the Iraqi military presence in those areas.

All told, the number of Iraqi soldiers is to grow from almost 200,000 by year’s end to 255,000 by the end of 2008. “The Iraqis have been able to recruit and fill to capacity,” said Brig. Gen. Robin Swan, who oversees the training of the Iraq Army.

In Mosul, only a single battalion of American troops — in concert with a large number of Iraqi soldiers and police officers — helps provide security for a city of more than a million. Still,
considerable challenges remain. The Iraqi Army has only about half the noncommissioned officers it needs. Another important weakness, said Maj. Gen. Benjamin R. Mixon, who recently completed his tour as the senior American commander in northern Iraq, is that Iraqi military training has been focused on developing the skills of individual soldiers, not on fighting as a unit.

“They don’t have a collective training program right now,” General Mixon said in an interview. “They put a jundi out there and the way he learns to fight is by getting shot at,” he added, using the Iraqi term for a soldier.

Some experts also remain skeptical that a largely Shiite army and police force can ever reliably enforce the peace equitably if American forces rapidly draw down. “The binding constraint is sectarian politics,” Stephen Biddle, a military expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, said.

American officers acknowledge the problems but assert that progress can be made if the United States does not rush the process.

“Don’t do it too fast,” said Lt. Gen. James M. Dubik, who oversees the training of Iraq’s security forces. “Transfer those responsibilities that you can to the organizations that can handle them and withhold responsibility from organizations that can’t.”

A number of efforts are under way to improve the training and quality of Iraqi forces. A national network of training centers is being expanded to train Iraqi units near their home areas. To address the shortage of noncommissioned officers in the army, 10 percent of the most promising recruits are being promoted to corporals while efforts are being made to encourage former army officers to rejoin.

A chronic shortage of officers also afflicts the Iraqi police, which is no small problem since only officers are authorized to make arrests. Two new police academies are to be established, and the normal three-year training program is being shortened for college graduates. The Americans are also trying to adjust the sectarian balance of the Iraqi police by pressing the Iraqi government to recruit more Sunnis, though such efforts have been frustrated in some areas like Diyala Province.

Teams of American advisers are working with the Iraqi Defense and Interior Ministries in an attempt to improve their ability to manage and sustain the force.

American combat brigades, however, are to play a key role in augmenting the training and encouraging Iraqi units in the field to take more responsibility. Advocates of the plan say that brigades are well suited for this mission.

Many brigade commanders have done multiple tours in Iraq, giving them considerable experience in dealing with local leaders, Iraqi forces and the diverse spectrum of threats. The commanders have an array of abilities to draw on. In addition to directing infantry units, they can order air and artillery strikes, arrange for medical evacuations and access a broad selection of intelligence.
Brigades oversee the small 11-to-15-member advisory teams that work with the Iraqi Army and the police. The State Department’s provincial reconstruction teams, which advise the Iraqis on economic projects and ways to improve local governments, are also attached to combat brigades.

An American official said that each brigade commander would be allowed to decide how many soldiers to assign to expanded training and advising efforts, when American forces should carry out military operations and when they should stand back and let Iraqi forces take the lead.

The approach is already being tried in some areas like Falluja, where Marine squads have taken up positions in police stations while other combat forces have been removed from the city.

“You enable brigade commanders and then decentralize authority to him to take account of conditions on the ground,” the official said. “He can set the dials on how much the U.S. is in the lead, how much you teach the Iraqis to do and how much you can simply back up the Iraqis.”

In some areas, the commanders might allocate an entire battalion to augment training efforts. In others, one company in the battalion might focus on training while the remaining companies carry out combat operations with the Iraqis.

The type of training could vary. General Mixon, for example, said that a brigade might concentrate on collective training: teaching Iraq platoons and companies to fight effectively as units. The brigade commanders, officials say, are in the best position to evaluate the threats in their areas, the abilities of the Iraqi forces they work with and the local political situation. Previous efforts to shift responsibility to the Iraqis faltered in part because the efforts were influenced by American officials too removed from the battlefield, officials say.

“We had too-centralized this process a couple of years ago when we were in the transition business,” the senior official added. “We got it wrong in too many local places like Diyala and segments of Baghdad.”

This approach differs from proposals by some counterinsurgency experts, like Lt. Col. John Nagl, that the Army establish a permanent corps of highly trained advisers and use it as the principal means to train Iraqi and foreign forces elsewhere.

It is also radically different from that advocated by some foreign policy specialists, who have urged the United States to quickly withdraw combat brigades while leaving behind a limited number of trainers. Such a strategy was outlined by the Iraq Study Group, a panel led by former Secretary of State James A. Baker III and former Representative Lee H. Hamilton, and a variant of this approach has been embraced by Senator Barack Obama in his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

The rancorous debate in Washington has centered on troop withdrawal schedules. But the
American command's planning suggests less public but equally fundamental differences over the military structures that the generals say are needed to manage the transition toward Iraqi control.

**Nov. 25 A3**
**Bush loses Australian ally in vote**
**AP**

Conservative Prime Minister John Howard, one of the Bush administration's staunchest allies, suffered a humiliating election defeat Saturday at the hands of an opposition leader who has vowed to pull troops out of Iraq.

Labor leader Kevin Rudd, a Chinese-speaking former diplomat, has also promised to sign the Kyoto Protocol on capping greenhouse gas emissions, leaving the U.S. as the only industrialized country not to have joined it.

Rudd, speaking Sunday in the northeastern city of Brisbane at his first news conference as incoming prime minister, promised "action, and action now" on climate change. Rudd said Labor lawmakers were due to meet on Thursday, and he hoped that he and his ministers would be sworn in soon after that.

Howard, who reshaped his country's image abroad with unwavering support for the war in Iraq, dominated Australian politics for more than a decade but failed to read the signs that voters had grown tired of his rule.

Adding to the sting of his party's decisive defeat, official results showed Howard was likely to lose his parliamentary seat altogether. Only one other sitting prime minister has lost his district in the 106-year history of Australia's federal government.

The six-week campaign was fought largely over domestic issues such as economic management, and Howard's unpopular labor law reforms that critics say strip workers of their rights.

But a strong underlying factor was the prospect of a generational change.

Rudd, who was expected to be sworn in as prime minister in the coming week, had accused Howard of being out of touch with modern Australia and ill-prepared to deal with issues such as climate change and high-speed Internet.

**Howard campaigned on his economic management, arguing that his government was mostly responsible for 17 years of unbroken economic growth, fueled by Chinese and Indian demand for Australian coal and other minerals. He contended that Rudd could not be trusted to maintain prosperous times.**

Rudd said he planned to visit Washington next year, and that atop the agenda would be his plan to pull Australia's 550 combat troops out of Iraq. Howard had rejected withdrawal
plans for Australia's troops in Iraq, and refused to ratify the pact on reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

"Today the Australian people have decided that we as a nation will move forward," Rudd said Saturday in a victory speech before hundreds of cheering supporters in his home state of Queensland. "To plan for the future, to prepare for the future, to embrace the future and together as Australians to unite and write a new page in our nation's history."

The White House President Bush called Howard and Rudd Saturday evening.

"The president and Prime Minister-elect Rudd both said they look forward to working together to strengthen even further the U.S.-Australia relationship," White House National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe said.

"The President told Prime Minister Howard he appreciates his friendship and his strong leadership over the past seven years they have worked together, which has resulted in a stronger U.S.-Australia alliance."

Australia is the latest country to see elections throw out governments that contributed to the U.S. war in Iraq.

Poland's new prime minister, Donald Tusk, has vowed to take a firmer stand in relations with the United States. He said in his inaugural address Friday that by the end of next year Poland would withdraw its 900 troops from Iraq, where it leads an international contingent of about 2,000 soldiers from 10 nations in the south-central part of the country.

Howard had stayed on to fight for a fifth term in office despite months of negative opinion poll numbers and appeals from some colleagues to quit. He took the blame for his government's defeat.

"I accept full responsibility for the Liberal Party campaign, and I therefore accept full responsibility for the coalition's defeat in this election campaign," Howard said in his concession speech in Sydney.

He said it appeared "very likely" he would lose his seat in parliament to former television journalist Maxine McKew.

The outgoing government fell into turmoil almost immediately, with Howard's nominated successor, outgoing Treasurer Peter Costello, announcing Sunday he would not accept the post of opposition leader.

The surprise announcement opens the possibility of a bruising fight for the leadership, with outgoing Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and former Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull likely candidates.

Rudd's Labor Party had more than 53 percent of the vote with over 75 percent of ballots
counted, compared to 46.8 percent for Howard's coalition, according to the Australian Electoral Commission.

An Australian Broadcasting Corp. analysis showed that Labor would get at least 81 places in the 150-seat lower house of Parliament — a clear majority.

Few in Rudd's team have any federal government experience. They include a former rock star — one-time Midnight Oil singer Peter Garrett — and a number of former union officials.

Rudd has more experience in foreign policy than any other area of government, and was expected to adopt a nuanced, non-confrontational approach to diplomacy. He sent "greetings ... to our great friend and ally the United States" in his victory speech.

Nov. 25 A19
Sects shun rivalry for peace, security
LA Times

Despite persistent sectarian tensions in the Iraqi government, war-weary Sunnis and Shiites are joining hands at the local level to protect their communities from militants on both sides, U.S. military officials say.

In the last two months, a U.S.-backed policing movement called Concerned Citizens, launched last year in Sunni-dominated Anbar province under the banner of the Awakening movement, has spread rapidly into the mixed Iraqi heartland.

Of the nearly 70,000 Iraqi men in the Awakening movement, started by Sunni Muslim sheiks who turned their followers against Al Qaeda in Iraq, there are now more in Baghdad and its environs than anywhere else, and a growing number of those are Shiite Muslims.

Commanders in the field think they have tapped into a genuine public expression of reconciliation that has outpaced the elected government's progress on mending the sectarian rift.

"What you find is these people have lived together for decades with no problem until the terrorists arrived and tried to instigate the problem," said Lt. Col. Valery Keaveny, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 509th Airborne unit in the Iskandariya area south of Baghdad. "So they are perfectly willing to work together to keep the terrorists out."

As late as this summer, there were no Shiites in the community policing groups. Today, there are about 15,000 in 24 all-Shiite groups and 18 mixed groups, senior U.S. military officials say. More are joining daily.

Here in Qarghulia, a rural community east of Baghdad, the results are palpable. Killings are down dramatically and public confidence is reviving.

"Sunnis-Shiites, no problem," said Obede Ali Hussein, 22, who stood at a checkpoint built by the
U.S. Army along the Diyala River. "We want to protect our neighborhood."

For commanders in areas where Sunni-Shiite warring had brought normal life to a standstill, the unexpected flowering of sectarian cooperation has proved a boon.

"I couldn't do it without them," said Capt. Troy Thomas, whose 1st Cavalry unit is responsible for securing the Qarghulia area.

Thomas said 42 of the 49 traffic checkpoints in his area are manned by local groups, including Sunnis and Shiites. He said they both extend his reach and perform with a sensitivity that no U.S. soldier could match.

"They grew up in the area," Thomas said. "They know who should be there and who shouldn't."

At his checkpoint, Ali Hussein eyed a steady stream of cars, farm trucks and motor scooters weaving down the rural Diyala River road toward the main north-south highway.

"Nobody could drive through the street six weeks ago," he said. "The street was empty."

Before this year's troop buildup, U.S. soldiers seldom ventured into Qarghulia. The area was patrolled by two Baghdad-based companies, or about 160 men, said Col. Wayne Grigsby, commander of the 3rd Infantry Division's 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team. National police had little presence there, either, and when they did show up, were mistrusted by the populace.

In this lawless climate, Al Qaeda in Iraq held sway in the chronically violent Sunni city of Salman Pak, while Shiite militias enforced mafioso-style protection in Qarghulia.

In early May, Thomas set up a 90-strong outpost dubbed Patrol Base Assassin in Qarghulia's Four Corners area, a crossroads where the rural population shops in rows of concrete strip malls.

When he arrived, about half the shops were shuttered, and those still doing business were paying protection money to the Mahdi Army, a Shiite militia, Thomas said.

To restore security in his Vermont-shaped area of 150 square miles, Thomas sought help. National police units would augment his patrols with checkpoints on the busy highway, but he remained exposed along the rural roads to the east and west.

He didn't hesitate when the local sheiks, who had heard of the spreading Concerned Citizens movement, approached him.

The first group, formed in September, now maintains about a dozen checkpoints along the Diyala River on the area's western edge and patrols back roads. The sheiks, both Sunni and Shiite, selected a Sunni farmer, Abu Ammash, to be the group's leader and filled its ranks with their followers, who came from both sects.

Over a recent two-day period, Thomas, a Minnesota-bred martial arts specialist, spent a
considerable amount of time in the company of sheiks, who were starting a second Concerned Citizens group to protect his eastern flank.

The new group will be headed by Hamed Gitan Khalaf, a Shiite and former sergeant major in the Iraqi army.

Gitan said sect plays no part in his command, which will be split almost evenly between Sunni and Shiite.

"All of us are hand in hand," he said.

The new group had a rocky initiation one morning when a squadron consisting of Thomas' soldiers, Gitan and his retinue of personal guards, a truckload of uniformed national police and a couple of carloads of civic officials descended upon the presumably abandoned house chosen to be its headquarters. They came face to face with a woman in a black hijab surrounded by scruffy children.

After an animated debate, Thomas vetoed Gitan's plan to forcibly move the family across the highway to an abandoned industrial building.

"What I need you to do is find a legitimate place," he told Gitan. "I know they're pretty much squatting here, but we're not going to be like Jaish al Mahdi" -- the Mahdi Army.

Later that day, the scene was repeated with a better plan. The family agreed to a payment and a promise of an equivalent house.

Next, Thomas brought all of Gitan's entourage behind the concrete walls of his base for screening -- retinal scans and digital fingerprinting -- and issued them badges and the sand-colored T-shirts of the Concerned Citizens.

"I don't want an American convoy to come down here and see a bunch of guys with guns and shoot them up," he said.

The exact size of the group was yet to be determined. Gitan said he had 1,500 volunteers, most of them unemployed. Thomas thought he needed only a dozen more checkpoints, enough to pay only a tenth of them.

Like other leaders, Gitan will probably put more men on the job and spread the money thinner to get the maximum number of youths employed.

Several guards interviewed by The Times said they were making between $100 and $125 a month -- about half the starting wage for a government worker, but real cash for a young man probably living with his family.

They emphatically said, however, that money was not their primary motivation.
"We are challenging the terrorists and we are ready to give our blood for the country," said Saddam Hadi Rasheed, 19, who was unemployed before joining Gitan's guard.

In some cases, Sunni and Shiite guards are being kept at arm's length. But Sunni and Shiite sheiks in Qarghulia said they have consciously put different tribes and sects into the field together to avoid any perception of favoritism.

So far, the handshake agreements among the sheiks and their followers have held up.

Still, infiltration by either Shiite militias or Al Qaeda in Iraq is a constant threat, as is the possibility of a group evolving into a new militia.

"Is this is just another way that someone can position himself to siphon his share in the community and be the godfather?" Col. Martin Stanton, chief of the Multinational Corps' reconciliation unit, said he wondered when he took the assignment.

But he said his skepticism has waned.

"That hasn't really happened on a large scale," he said. "You've got the will on the ground amongst the Iraqi people to stop fighting."

Sitting in his headquarters with a coterie of junior officers and sheiks, Qarghulia Concerned Citizens leader Abu Ammash foresaw big things. He said talks were underway with the Interior Ministry to transform his organization into the local police force for the area.

But, based on individual assessments of the men who make up the force, as well as simple math, U.S. commanders expect no more than a third of the Concerned Citizens to transition into the Iraqi security forces, whether the army, national police or local police.

The U.S. plan is to dismantle the Concerned Citizens groups once the economic revival that it hopes will be facilitated by their presence begins generating civilian jobs for them.

Until then, Ali Hussein, a day laborer before he became a guard, will remain at his post across the Diyala River from the Mahdi Army, ready to face enemy fire.

Although none of the new groups rising up against the Mahdi Army has yet been tested in combat, the danger is real. Last week, in a Sunni area just south of Baghdad, five members of a Concerned Citizens group were killed repelling an Al Qaeda in Iraq assault.

And one day recently, this graffiti appeared on several metal roll-up doors in a dingy strip mall here: "For the leaders of the Awakening and everybody who is involved with it, Warning: Death."

Ali Hussein didn't flinch.
"Most of their challenge is only with slogans," he said. "They are not courageous enough to face us. Even if they want to come, we are here ready to face them."

Nov. 25 A19
Insurgents driven by cash, not cause
Washington Post

Abu Nawall, a captured al-Qaeda in Iraq leader, said he didn't join the Sunni insurgent group here to kill Americans or to form a Muslim caliphate. He signed up for the cash.

"I was out of work and needed the money," said Abu Nawall, the nom de guerre of an unemployed metal worker who was paid as much as $1,300 a month as an insurgent. He spoke in a phone interview from an Iraqi military base where he is being detained. "How else could I support my family?"

U.S. military commanders say that insurgents across the country are increasingly motivated more by money than ideology and that a growing number of insurgent cells, struggling to pay recruits, are turning to gangster-style racketeering operations.

U.S. military officials have responded by launching a major campaign to disrupt al-Qaeda in Iraq's financial networks and spread propaganda that portrays its leaders as greedy thugs, an effort the officials describe as a key factor in their recent success beating down the insurgency.

"I tell a lot of my soldiers: A good way to prepare for operations in Iraq is to watch the sixth season of 'The Sopranos,' " said Maj. Gen. Rick Lynch, commander of U.S. forces in central Iraq, referring to the hit HBO series about the mob. "You're seeing a lot of Mafioso kind of activity."

In Mosul, a northern city of 2 million people that straddles the Tigris River, U.S. officials are also spending money to buoy the Iraqi economy -- including handing out microgrants sometimes as small as several hundred dollars -- to reduce the soaring unemployment that can turn young Iraqi men into insurgents-for-hire.

Col. Stephen Twitty, commander of U.S. forces in Mosul and surrounding Nineveh province, said the dismantling of insurgent financing networks is the primary reason that violent attacks here have dropped from about 18 a day last year to about eight a day now.

"We're starting to hear a lot of chatter about the insurgents running out of money," said Twitty, of the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division. "They are not able to get money to pay people for operations."

In a 30-minute interview, Abu Nawall described his work managing the $6 million or so annual budget of the Mosul branch of the Islamic State of Iraq, an insurgent umbrella group believed to have been formed by al-Qaeda in Iraq. The Iraqi military, which is still
interrogating Abu Nawall, agreed to allow a Washington Post reporter to meet him in person after repeated requests for an interview. The interview was canceled at the last moment, but the military later allowed The Post to speak with Abu Nawall by phone as he sat in an Iraqi general's office.

Abu Nawall said he joined the group over the summer because his metalworking business had dried up. The 28-year-old said he was responsible for running the bureaucracy and arranging payments to the 500 or so fighters for the group in the city, who he said try to carry out as many as 30 attacks a day.

"Most of our money comes from payments we receive from places like Syria and from kidnappings," Abu Nawall said, adding that ransoms can reach $50,000 a person. But he denied U.S. claims that attacks in the city had dropped or that the group's funding had stopped. "We still have money," he said.

Much of Abu Nawall's account could not be independently verified, though he said he was speaking freely and without coercion by his detainers. His description of the insurgency's viability was in some cases significantly more upbeat than the one offered by Iraqi and U.S. officials.

But Abu Nawall and his captors agreed that Iraqis were joining the insurgency out of economic necessity. "Of course we hate the Americans and want them gone immediately," Abu Nawall said. "But the reason I and many others joined the Islamic State of Iraq is to support our families."

Abu Nawall described himself as a middle-management accountant for the insurgency, but he acknowledged killing four Iraqi police officers because he viewed them as collaborators with the U.S. military. He said he was not primarily involved in ordering violent attacks.

Brig. Gen. Moutaa Habeeb Jassim, commander of the 2nd Division of the Iraqi army, which has been holding Abu Nawall since his capture earlier this fall, said he suspected the detainee was responsible for far more deaths and had been involved with the insurgency since last year. "Abu Nawall is not always telling the truth," Habeeb said.

The U.S. military has launched a propaganda effort to describe Abu Nawall and other insurgents as greedy in order to undermine support for al-Qaeda in Iraq and create infighting among insurgent groups.

In a memo to the provincial police chief, U.S. military officials provided him with a list of "talking points" that they asked him to repeat on local television. "We want these talking points to raise suspicion that higher level [al-Qaeda in Iraq] leaders are greedy and placing personal financial gain over the mission," the memo said.

The memo also said that Abu Nawall admitted that the group's leader in northern Iraq, known as Mohammed al Nada or Abu Basha'ir, had told fighters to attack civilians "to
"He stated that most of this money stays with the higher level leaders while the fighters on
the street get paid only a small amount," the memo said. Two leaders, identified as
Mohammed Bazouna and Fuad, "are growing rich through these activities without paying
their fighters salaries and giving them the resources to conduct effective attacks."

In the interview, however, Abu Nawall denied making the statements described in the
memo. The document also referred to Abu Nawall as the group's emir, or leader, in Mosul,
even though U.S. and Iraqi officials said in interviews that he was the deputy emir in the
city.

American officials said that Abu Nawall is just the latest Sunni financier detained as part
of a campaign this year to disrupt the group's funding networks. Twitty, the brigade
commander in Mosul, said their effort started in April when they realized raids on low-
level figures weren't as effective as they had hoped.

"We're killing a bunch of insurgents and capturing a bunch of insurgents, but we weren't
really cutting the head of the snake," he said. "We said: How can we better conduct
operations to cut the head off the snake? So we looked at finances. And we went after them
hard."

The racketeering operations extended to nearly every type of business in the city, including
a Pepsi plant, cement manufacturers and a cellphone company, which paid the insurgents
$200,000 a month, Twitty said.

One of the biggest sources of income was a real estate scam, in which insurgents stole 26
ledgers that contained the deeds to at least $88 million worth of property and then resold
them, according to Lt. Col. Eric Welsh, commander of the battalion responsible for Mosul.

Mosul is the central hub in Iraq for wiring money to the insurgency from Syria and other
countries, Welsh said, with three of the largest banks in the country that transfer money
operating branches in the city. He said U.S. forces have shut down several such money
exchanges in Mosul.

U.S. forces detained a major al-Qaeda in Iraq financier Sept. 25 with a passport that
showed he had been to Syria 30 times, according to a military summary of his capture.

Another man, captured by the Iraqi army Sept. 3, is thought to be the No. 1 al-Qaeda in
Iraq financier in Nineveh province, responsible for negotiating the release of kidnapping
victims, according to another military summary. It said he was found with checks totaling
775 million dinars, or $600,000.

Welsh said he thinks all the money that flowed into the al-Qaeda in Iraq network
corrupted some of its leaders and drove them further away from the modest lifestyle that their religious ideology promotes.

"If what they are truly migrating into is money, money, money," he said, "then that means they are disenfranchised from what al-Qaeda stands for. What you end up getting is al-Qaeda being ineffective and diluted and being almost something else."

The challenge for U.S. troops is how to break the racketeering operations controlled by al-Qaeda in Iraq without destroying the legitimate business needed to rebuild the country. "It's just like gardening," Welsh said, "I could spray herbicide everywhere and easily kill all the weeds. But what's the point if I kill all the flowers, too?"

**Nov. 27 A4**

**Split slows Blackwater probe**

*AP*

The State Department’s acerbic top auditor wasn’t happy when Justice Department officials told one of his aides to leave the room so they could discuss a criminal investigation of Blackwater Worldwide, the contractor protecting U.S. diplomats in Iraq.

The episode reveals the badly strained relationship between Bush administration officials over the probe into whether Blackwater smuggled weapons into Iraq that could have gotten into insurgents’ hands.

As a result of the bureaucratic crosscurrents between State’s top auditor and Justice, the investigation has been bogged down for months.

A key date was July 11, when Howard Krongard, State’s inspector general, sent an e-mail to one of his assistant inspector generals, telling him to "IMMEDIATELY" stop work on the Blackwater investigation. That lead to criticisms by Democrats that Krongard has tried to protect Blackwater and block investigations into contractor-related wrongdoing in Iraq.

"Instead of cooperating, Mr. Krongard apparently created a series of obstacles to the inquiry," said Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee examining Krongard’s performance as the State Department official responsible for stamping out waste, fraud and abuse.

Krongard, whose credibility was damaged by the recent disclosure that his brother had a business affiliation with Blackwater, has disputed the charge, though he recused himself from Blackwater matters after the potential conflict of interest emerged.

His aide, Terry Heide, who was kicked out of the July 31 meeting, also says she’s been unfairly blamed for slowing the Blackwater probe. Her role was to collect State Department documents for the investigators - a job she did well, according to her lawyer. But even Krongard’s own staff saw her as a hindrance.
Brian Rubendall, a senior State Department investigator, has questioned the halt in the inquiry, telling the oversight committee in an October interview that there was no justifiable "reason for us to stop that investigation. None."

Krongard said he put the brakes on because he was concerned a separate audit of Blackwater contracts might "contaminate" the Justice Department’s work.

Blackwater has called the smuggling allegations baseless. However, earlier this year two former Blackwater employees pleaded guilty to possession of stolen firearms that were shipped in interstate or foreign commerce. They are cooperating with federal agents. Blackwater said the two were fired after it was learned they were stealing from the company.

Altogether, the trail of internal e-mails, testimony from a Nov. 14 oversight hearing and interviews with participants form a picture of bureaucratic infighting with consequences far beyond Washington.

The State Department’s role in the Blackwater weapons probe began months before the Sept. 16 Baghdad shootings by Blackwater guards that killed 17 Iraqis and escalated public scrutiny of the company.

In March, Ron Militana, a special agent in the investigations unit, received Rubendall’s approval to interview State Department personnel and meet with Blackwater attorneys about allegations the company was illegally transporting arms into Iraq. Militana also discussed potential criminal proceedings in the case with a federal prosecutor.

In late June, John DeDona, then chief of the IG’s investigative unit, e-mailed Krongard and his deputy, William Todd, to alert them to the probe. Krongard responded cryptically: "Please do not treat anything in the e-mail below as having been seen by me, advised to me, or understood or approved by me. If there is something significant in the message below, please come and tell me about it."

Two weeks later, as Militana was trying to obtain copies of Blackwater contracts from the department’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security, DeDona sent another message to Krongard telling him of Militana’s work.

In a July 11 e-mail to DeDona, Krongard told him Militana was to "IMMEDIATELY" stop the work. Krongard said he wanted a briefing from the U.S. Attorney’s office in North Carolina on its Blackwater investigation before his agents went farther.

Waxman and other critics say Howard Krongard’s order to halt came at the same time Blackwater CEO Erik Prince was considering whether to offer his brother, Alvin "Buzzy" Krongard, a spot on the company’s newly forming advisory board.

On July 26, Prince invited Alvin Krongard to join Blackwater’s advisory board. A week later, Robert Higdon, chief of the criminal division in the U.S. Attorney’s office for the eastern district of North Carolina, and James Candelmo, Higdon’s deputy, were in
Howard Krongard initially said his brother had no ties to Blackwater. But during the Nov. 14 oversight hearing, he recused himself from inquiries related to the company, explaining that Alvin Krongard had just told him he had attended an advisory board meeting. Alvin Krongard resigned from the board two days later because of the uproar the arrangement created.

While Democrats claimed a glaring conflict of interest, Krongard said he pulled his staff off the Blackwater probe so they wouldn’t step on work being done by Stuart Bowen, the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction.

Bowen had sought help from Krongard’s office to audit two Blackwater contracts — the same ones Militana was helping the U.S. Attorney’s office examine, according to Krongard, who said alarms went off when he realized the potential overlap.

"To be assisting a criminal investigation into the exact same two contracts that we were already assisting a civil audit into, raised a question of parallel proceedings, which needed to be deconflicted before one infected or contaminated the other," he said.

Krongard did not say what the contracts are for or give their value. The State Department pays Blackwater and two other firms $570 million a year for security services.

In a deposition to the oversight committee, Todd, the deputy inspector general, supported Krongard. "We had basically several of the same organizations looking at the exact same stuff," Todd said.

But Waxman rejected the rationale. "You halted an investigation, demanded a personal briefing from the Justice Department, (and) assigned your congressional affairs director to keep tabs on the investigation," Waxman said to Krongard at the hearing. Waxman called the moves "highly unorthodox."

Heide, the congressional affairs director Krongard called his "alter ego," was collecting the documents needed by Bowen and the U.S Attorney’s office, e-mails show.

But members of Krongard’s own staff, along with Higdon and Candelmo of the U.S. attorney’s office in North Carolina, saw her as a roadblock. Rubendall told the committee Candelmo and Higdon planned in advance to raise grand jury information during the July 31 meeting in order to force Heide out of the room.

"We weren’t going to discuss grand jury material, but that was the ruse that they were going to use to get her out of the meeting," Rubendall said.

Heide referred questions to her attorney, David Laufman, who said an e-mail exchange between Krongard and Heide indicated she was doing as directed.
"I am trying to stay only situationally aware," she wrote Aug. 8, "so I can keep any conflicts at bay."

According to Waxman, the problems hampering the Blackwater probe persist. Justice investigators have been unable to get needed documents. Militana has not been allowed to give his full attention to the criminal investigation even though Krongard said he would.

"I think that the State Department is responsible for investigating crimes perpetrated against the State Department," Militana said in an October interview with the committee. "The (Justice Department) can do it, of course, but there has to be some involvement by the State Department."

War debate changes course
Washington Post

The debate at home over the Iraq war has shifted significantly in the two months since Gen. David H. Petraeus testified to Congress and President Bush ordered the first troop withdrawals, with more Americans now concluding that the situation on the ground is improving.

A new poll released yesterday underscored the changing political environment, finding the public more positive about the military effort in Iraq than at any point in 14 months as a surge of optimism follows the rapid decline in violence. Yet Bush remains as unpopular as ever in the survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, and the public remains just as committed to bringing U.S. troops home.

The evolving public attitudes reflect, or perhaps explain, a turn in Washington as well. While Bush and Congress are still fighting over the war, the debate has moved to the back burner as Iran, spending, health care, the economy and other issues generate more political energy. The focus of the presidential campaign, especially on the Democratic side, has broadened as well. Even antiwar groups that once denied that security has gotten better have recalibrated their arguments to focus on the failed efforts to reach political conciliation among Iraqi factions or the risk of war with Iran.

The shift has strategists in both parties reevaluating their assumptions about how the final year of the Bush presidency and the election to succeed him will play out. If current trends continue, Iraq may still be a defining issue but perhaps not the only one, as it once seemed, according to partisan strategists and independent analysts, particularly if the economy heads south as some economists fear.

"What this reinforces is that Iraq is not as much of a pressure point as it was through much of the year -- which is not to say that it goes away as an issue," said Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew center. "If Iraq were to either go away or have a much lower profile in
the coming election, it would certainly be good for the Republicans and could be a transforming factor. But it's real important to get 'could be' in that sentence."

The Pew poll highlighted the dichotomy in public views. Nearly half of Americans, or 48 percent, believe that the military effort in Iraq is going well, up from 30 percent in February, and 43 percent agree that U.S. forces are making progress in defeating insurgents, also up from 30 percent. The last time Americans felt as positively about the military effort was in September 2006.

Still, the proportion of Americans who want to bring troops home has remained essentially unchanged at 54 percent, as has the share who think the effort in Iraq will ultimately fail, at 46 percent. Bush's job approval rating has actually slipped by three points to 30 percent. (The survey was based on a sample of 1,399 adults interviewed from Nov. 20 to 26 and has a three percentage point margin of sampling error.)

Antiwar groups dismissed the importance of the poll. "The bottom line is the bottom line, and that is that people want out," said former congressman Tom Andrews (D-Maine), national director of a coalition called Win Without War. "That hasn't changed and that isn't going to change."

Former congressman Vin Weber (R-Minn.), a war supporter and top adviser to former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney's presidential campaign, said it may be too late to change the public's mind when it comes to the fundamental issue. "The central question is not: Are we winning or losing?" he said. "The central question is: Was it worth it? And that was resolved a long time ago."

And yet, at least to an extent, the Washington debate has moved on. Congress made only a faint effort to pass legislation mandating a troop withdrawal as part of a $50 billion war spending bill this month and then quickly shelved it. Not counting the Turkish conflict with Kurdish rebels, Bush at his most recent news conference last month was not asked about the Iraq war until the 10th question. Not a single Iraq question came up at four of White House press secretary Dana Perino's seven full-fledged briefings this month.

Similarly, the Democratic presidential candidates who seemed to talk about little other than Iraq early in the year have spent more time quarreling about other issues lately. At their Oct. 30 debate in Philadelphia, the word "Iraq" was used 44 times, but the word "Iran" came up 69 times. Even Andrews's antiwar group plans to launch a new campaign, including television and print ads, focused on Iran, not Iraq. The message to Democrats, he said, will be: "If you can't act to stop the war in Iraq, can you at least act to stop a war in Iran?"

War supporters are adjusting strategy as well. Former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer, who co-founded a group called Freedom's Watch to press Republicans to stick with Bush's war policy, sees an opening to expand the message. "The campaign we launched in August was really to make sure Republicans didn't defect," he said. "Now it's
fair to say, because facts have changed on the ground, that we have the opportunity to bring back on board independents who had been lost."

While the Iraq debate has faded for the moment, it promises to resume as funding needs become an issue. In pushing their case to deny Bush further money for the war, opponents have dropped the argument that violence really has not fallen and point instead to the fact that the troop "surge" earlier this year has not yielded the political accord it was supposed to.

"The White House tends to focus on the military situation and ignore the political situation," said P.J. Crowley, a Clinton White House national security aide now at the Center for American Progress. "Remember, the surge is a tactic, and while a discrete tactic may be working better than expected, the overall strategic position has not fundamentally changed."

Even so, it has changed some political calculations. If the violence remains down, it may enable Petraeus when he returns to Washington in March to recommend pulling out more than the 30,000 troops now scheduled to leave by July. If so, the fall general election could be played out against the backdrop of troops coming home.

"Now everybody says they're for pulling out troops," said Christopher F. Gelpi, a Duke University scholar who has studied wartime public opinion. "The question is just how fast. That fuzzes the issue. If violence is still down, if the cost of the mission goes down, that makes it easier to stay there even if there's no progress."

Nov. 28 A3
Blackwater guards accused of steroid use, defying orders
AP

A federal grand jury investigating Blackwater Worldwide heard witnesses Tuesday as a private lawsuit accused the government contractor's bodyguards of ignoring orders and abandoning their posts shortly before taking part in a Baghdad shooting that left 17 Iraqi civilians dead.

Filed this week in U.S. District Court in Washington, the civil complaint also accuses North Carolina-based Blackwater of failing to give drug tests to its guards in Baghdad—even though an estimated one in four of them was using steroids or other "judgment altering substances."

A Blackwater spokeswoman said Tuesday its employees are banned from using steroids or other enhancement drugs but declined to comment on the other charges detailed in the 18-page lawsuit.

The lawsuit was filed Monday on behalf of five Iraqis who were killed and two who were injured during the Sept. 16 shooting in Baghdad's Nisoor Square. The shootings enraged the Iraqi government, and the Justice Department is investigating whether it can bring criminal charges in the case, even though the State Department promised limited immunity to the Blackwater guards.
Justice Department national security prosecutors Kenneth Kohl and Stephen Ponticiello, both of whom are handling the Blackwater case, spent much of Tuesday afternoon in the grand jury room, which is off limits to the public. Two witnesses also spent hours behind closed doors in the District of Columbia's federal courthouse.

One of them emerged sporadically to speak with an attorney, who refused to identify himself, his law firm or his client.

When the grand jury was dismissed for the day, the men left without commenting, as did Kohl.

Before the shootings in Baghdad last September, the three teams of an estimated dozen Blackwater bodyguards had already dropped off the State Department official they were tasked with protecting when they headed to Nisoor Square, according to the lawsuit filed by lawyers working with the Center for Constitutional Rights.

Blackwater and State Department personnel staffing a tactical operations center "expressly directed the Blackwater shooters to stay with the official and refrain from leaving the secure area," the complaint says. "Reasonable discovery will establish that the Blackwater shooters ignored those directives."

Additionally, the lawsuit notes: "One of Blackwater's own shooters tried to stop his colleagues from indiscriminately firing upon the crowd of innocent civilians but he was unsuccessful in his efforts."

The civil complaint offers new details of the incident that has strained relations between the United States and Iraq, which is demanding the right to launch its own prosecution of the Blackwater bodyguards.

The Justice Department says it likely will be months before it decides whether it can prosecute the guards, and it is trying now to pinpoint how many shooters in the Blackwater convoy could face charges. A senior U.S. law enforcement official confirmed Tuesday that government investigators are looking at whether the Blackwater guards were authorized to be in the square at the time of the shooting. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because of the ongoing investigation.

In an interview, lead plaintiff attorney Susan L. Burke said private investigators turned up the new evidence through interviews with people in Iraq and the United States "who would have reason to know." Those people do not include government officials, Burke said, and she declined to comment when asked if they include Blackwater employees.

The civil lawsuit does not specify how much money the victims and their families are seeking from Blackwater, its 11 subsidiaries and founder, Erik Prince, all of whom are named as defendants.

"We're looking for compensatory (damages) because the people who were killed were the breadwinners in their families," Burke said. "And we're looking for punitive in a manner
that suffices to change the corporation's conduct. We have a real interest in holding them accountable for what were completely avoidable deaths."

The lawsuit also accuses Blackwater of routinely sending its guards into Baghdad despite knowing that at least 25 percent of them were using steroids or other "judgment-altering substances." Attorneys estimated that Blackwater employs about 600 guards in Iraq. The company "did not conduct drug-testing of any of its shooters before sending them equipped with heavy weapons into the streets of Baghdad," the lawsuit states.

Blackwater spokeswoman Anne Tyrrell said Blackwater employees are tested for drug use before they are hired and later given random quarterly tests. She said use of steroids and other performance enhancement drugs "are absolutely in violation of our policy."

"Blackwater has very strict policies concerning drug use, and if anyone were known to be in violation of them they would be immediately fired," Tyrrell said.

She declined comment on whether the bodyguards ignored their orders and abandoned their posts, or on other details outlined in the lawsuit.

Blackwater's contract with the State Department to protect diplomats in Iraq expires in May, and there are questions whether it will remain as the primary contractor for diplomatic bodyguards. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has said his Cabinet is drafting legislation that would force the State Department to replace Blackwater with another security company.

The State Department declined to comment on the case Tuesday, citing standard policy on pending legal matters. Deputy spokesman Tom Casey referred questions on the matter "to those involved in the lawsuit."

Nov. 28      B1
Kalamazoo Army reserve unit prepares for Iraq
The Grand Rapids Press

Admittedly, retired Master Sgt. Michael Bevins' tenure in Iraq with the Kalamazoo-based 415th Civil Affairs Battalion was short -- two weeks.

But the 15 years the Plainwell man spent with that unit's leadership tells him the nearly 100 West Michigan troops now mobilizing for duty in Iraq will have experience to draw on from their superiors.

"There's senior leadership with this group, and I know these guys, I've seen them in action, and there is no one that I'd rather go with than these people," Bevins said Tuesday. "Some of the (soldiers) are going for their first time, and they're in good hands."

The Department of Defense announced Tuesday that the 415th which will serve as intermediaries between Iraqis and the military, will leave Gerald R. Ford International Airport
early Thursday for a one-year tour of duty.

The Army reserves, about 50 of whom are from the Grand Rapids area, will assemble in Kalamazoo at 2:30 a.m., travel by bus to the airport and leave about 4:30 a.m., Maj. Tony Vacha said.

After final preparations at Fort Bragg, N.C., the group will fly to Iraq to perform services such as reducing civilian interference with soldiers’ missions and minimizing the military disruption of everyday life for Iraqi citizens, Vacha said.

The unit has several Arabic-speaking officers who can aid communication between troops and the public. The reserves also will support infrastructure rebuilding.

"They're trained to the best of their ability to help both our troops and the locals in Iraq," Vacha said.

And they will face danger, as Bevins' experience in 2004 illustrates. He lost the sight in his right eye when a Humvee he was riding was hit by a roadside bomb in February 2004. Bevins was in Iraq only two weeks.

Bevins, who retired a year ago, will visit his former battalion before the unit leaves Thursday. He speaks regularly with members, and said some are concerned about the deployment. Others are embracing the challenge.

"I'm not at all sorry to see them go," Bevins said. "I'm apprehensive because I don't want any of them to get hurt, but this is what we do."

Nov. 29 A1
Civilian Soldiers report for duty
The Grand Rapids Press

Army Maj. Chris Dowling has no illusions.

From his perspective, the mission of the Kalamazoo-based 415th Civil Affairs Battalion looks like anything but a clean military operation.

"I think it's a big challenge," said Dowling, 44, an East Grand Rapids resident who was to depart early today for a year of duty in Iraq. "Without a stable government and people having confidence in that government, that is a big barrier to overcome."

He will join about 120 soldiers in a mission that is more about building relationships than bombs and bullets -- and one that is critical to any chance for the U.S. to succeed in Iraq.

Although U.S. deaths in Iraq approach 4,000 and criticism of the war continues, American optimism about the military effort is on the rise, thanks to a decline in violence since June. But battalion members insist they do not have time to ponder the politics.

Tactics have shifted from a strict military operation to counterinsurgency and attempts to shore up a shaky Iraqi government. They are complicated by corruption in the government and violence between Sunni and Shiite ethnic groups.
"I'm going over there to accomplish the mission of my unit and take care of the soldiers," said Maj. Andrew Harter, 43, of Rockford.

He is one of several dozen West Michigan soldiers in the unit. After a 60-mile bus ride to the Gerald R. Ford International Airport before dawn this morning, the battalion was to depart for two months of training at Fort Bragg, N.C., before leaving for Iraq.

"My focus is just that -- the mission. When I get back, there is plenty of time for a political discussion," Harter said.

The battalion will focus on projects that could range from establishing medical clinics to rebuilding sewer systems. It also will act as a link between the Iraqis and other coalition military units.

The unit encompasses civilian soldiers whose occupations range from nurse to counselor to insurance claims specialist.

It also includes two soldiers who underwent months of training in Arabic language and culture at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, Calif.

Maj. Tony Vacha said specialists like that are invaluable to the unit's ability to do its job. "I think we are very well trained," said Vacha, a Cedar Springs resident who oversees daily activities at the Army Reserve Training Center in Portage and was not slated for deployment.

"I think where we are in the world today, civilian affairs is the main operation."

But Vacha also is realistic about how much U.S. troops can accomplish without the trust and cooperation of Iraqis. He is aware that classic counter-insurgency doctrine teaches that it takes 10 years to defeat an insurgency and that U.S. strategy shifted that way only a year ago.

"It's their country. They have more at stake than we do," he said.

But to 20-year-old Pfc. Scott Block, of Grand Rapids, there are signs of progress.

Indeed, U.S. casualties in Iraq are down in recent months, as are reports of Iraqi deaths. To proponents of a stay-the-course policy, it is evidence the strategy is paying off. Critics doubt that newly armed Sunni militias can be trusted not to turn on the Shiite-dominated government.

"I think we need to look at how far we've come," Block said. "I feel like we've accomplished a lot over there.

"It is extremely important that we show the Iraqis that we are not there to strictly enforce our rule. We are there to help them."

Staff Sgt. Chas Ryder, 29, of Wyoming, believes the two cultures -- American and Iraqi -- still have much to learn about each other. "They differ from us immensely," Ryder said.

"They are of a completely different belief system. Bringing them together will be a challenge. But we can do it."

For every soldier focused on the mission, today's departure also meant anxious family members left behind.
So it was for Susi Harter, of Rockford, who found it hard to part with her husband. The German native met Andrew Harter in Germany in 1987 and they married in 1989.

"It's difficult," she said. "But it's important. People over there need them. Unfortunately, not everybody over there agrees."

**Nov. 29 A9
Sunnis join US in security effort
AP**

Nearly 6,000 Sunni Arab residents joined a security pact with American forces Wednesday in what U.S. officers described as a critical step in plugging the remaining escape routes for extremists flushed from former strongholds.

The new alliance — called the single largest single volunteer mobilization since the war began — covers the "last gateway" for groups such as Al Qaeda in Iraq seeking new havens in northern Iraq, U.S. military officials said.

U.S. commanders have tried to build a ring around insurgents who fled military offensives launched earlier this year in the western Anbar province and later into Baghdad and surrounding areas. In many places, the U.S.-led battles were given key help from tribal militias — mainly Sunnis — that had turned against Al Qaeda and other groups.

Extremists have sought new footholds in northern areas once loyal to Saddam Hussein's Baath party as the U.S.-led gains have mounted across central regions. But their ability to strike near the capital remains.

A woman wearing an explosive-rigged belt blew herself up near an American patrol near Baqouba, about 35 miles northeast of Baghdad, the military announced Wednesday. The blast on Tuesday — a rare attack by a female suicide bomber — wounded seven U.S. troops and five Iraqis, the statement said.

The ceremony to pledge the 6,000 new fighters was presided over by a dozen sheiks — each draped in black robes trimmed with gold braiding — who signed the contract on behalf of tribesmen at a small U.S. outpost in north-central Iraq.

For about $275 a month — nearly the salary for the typical Iraqi policeman — the tribesmen will man about 200 security checkpoints beginning Dec. 7, supplementing hundreds of Iraqi forces already in the area.

About 77,000 Iraqis nationwide, mostly Sunnis, have broken with the insurgents and joined U.S.-backed self-defense groups.

Those groups have played a major role in the lull in violence: **648 Iraqi civilians have been killed or found dead in November to date, according to figures compiled by The Associated Press. This compares with 2,155 in May as the so-called "surge" of nearly 30,000 additional**
American troops gained momentum.

U.S. troop deaths in Iraq have also dropped sharply. So far this month, the military has reported 34 deaths, compared with 38 in October. In June, 101 U.S. soldiers died in Iraq. Village mayors and others who signed Wednesday's agreement say about 200 militants have sought refuge in the area, about 30 miles southwest of Kirkuk on the edge of northern Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region. Hawija is a predominantly Sunni Arab cluster of villages which has long been an insurgent flashpoint.

The recently arrived militants have waged a campaign of killing and intimidation to try to establish a new base, said Sheikh Khalaf Ali Issa, mayor of Zaab village.

"They killed 476 of my citizens, and I will not let them continue their killing," Issa said.

With the help of the new Sunni allies, "the Hawija area will be an obstacle to militants, rather than a pathway for them," said Maj. Sean Wilson, with the Army's 1st Brigade, 10th Mountain Division. "They're another set of eyes that we needed in this critical area."

By defeating militants in Hawija, U.S. and Iraqi leaders hope to keep them away from Kirkuk, an ethnically diverse city that is also the hub of Iraq's northern oil fields.

"They want to go north into Kirkuk and wreak havoc there, and that's exactly what we're trying to avoid," Army Maj. Gen. Mark P. Hertling, the top U.S. commander in northern Iraq, told The Associated Press this week.

Kurds often consider Kurkik part of their ancestral homeland and often refer to the city as the "Kurdish Jerusalem." Saddam, however, relocated tens of thousands of pro-regime Arabs to the city in the 1980s and 1990s under his "Arabization" policy.

The Iraqi government has begun resettling some of those Arabs to their home regions, making room for thousands of Kurds who have gradually returned to Kirkuk since Saddam's ouster.

Tension has been rising over the city's status — whether it will join the semi-autonomous Kurdish region or continue being governed by Baghdad.

"Hawija is the gateway through which all our communities — Kurdish, Turkomen and Arab alike — can become unsafe," said Abu Saif al-Jabouri, mayor of al-Multaqa village north of Kirkuk. "Do I love my neighbor in Hawija? That question no longer matters. I must work to help him, because his safety helps me."

In Baghdad, crowds waited until nightfall for the arrival a bus convoy carrying more than 800 Iraqi refugees home from Syria. The buses — funded by the Iraqi government — left Damascus on Tuesday and were expected in the Iraqi capital on Wednesday. Government officials gave no details on the delay.
Assailants shot to death a high-ranking government aide in Baghdad and a school principal north of the capital Monday as political wrangling continued over legislation considered key to stabilizing the country.

The slayings were a sign of the ongoing threat facing state employees, who are viewed by insurgents as collaborators with the U.S.-backed government.

Police in the capital said Maj. Gen. Fauzi Hussein Muhammed, an adviser at the Ministry of Information, was gunned down while driving in western Baghdad. His driver was injured. The ministry oversees the police, who in November lost 46 officers to violence. The previous month, 117 were killed, according to government figures.

The school principal was assassinated in Samarra, about 70 miles northwest of Baghdad. Police said two men opened fire on the unidentified school official's car as he drove to work. More than 300 teachers or educational employees have been killed since the start of the war in March 2003, according to the government.

Another assassination was reported in the northern city of Kirkuk. Police Brig. Gen. Sarhad Qadir said armed men traveling in two vehicles opened fire on a car carrying a local sheik who was involved in community efforts to fight insurgents. The sheik, Atallah Iskender, was killed, as was his driver. Qadir said the assailants dragged their bodies from the vehicle and burned them on the road.

Iskender was a member of the Hawija Awakening Council, which has recruited about 6,000 volunteers to work alongside U.S. and Iraqi forces to quell the insurgency in the region. Hawija is a mainly Sunni city near Kirkuk that has been plagued by insurgent attacks.

Violence had dropped considerably in the past two months, but politicians again Monday showed little inclination to match the trend with political reconciliation.

A bill that would expand employment opportunities in government for people who were members of Saddam Hussein's ruling Baath Party was the subject of another heated debate in parliament. Passage of the measure is considered crucial to bringing Sunni Arabs and Shiite Muslims closer together. However, many Shiites, who suffered under Saddam's Sunni-run regime, oppose letting ex-Baathists back into high-level government jobs.

During Monday's session, a Sunni lawmaker, Mutlaq al-Jubouri, complained that Sunnis were being discriminated against and that the current rules limiting ex-Baathists' job options amounted to racism.

No action was taken on the bill, the first of the so-called benchmarks sought by Washington to
prove Iraqi political progress to even reach parliament. When the bill was first debated last week, the session quickly deteriorated into yelling and finger-pointing.

U.S. military and diplomatic officials say that with violence ebbing, it is essential for politicians to solidify security gains by passing such legislation. But there is no indication when lawmakers will vote on the bill.

Dec. 5 A6
Iraq tells refugees to delay return
Washington Post

The Iraqi government on Tuesday urged some refugees not to go back to their homes yet, saying the country was unprepared to accommodate their return.

"The reality is that we cannot handle a huge influx of people," Abdul Samad al-Sultan, the minister of displacement and migration, said at a news conference to announce a joint plan with the United Nations to help returning Iraqis. "The refugees in some countries, we ask them to wait."

The acknowledgment came as the Iraqi cabinet asked the United Nations for what the government called a final one-year extension of authorization for U.S.-led forces to stay in Iraq. But in a newly released video, insurgents threatened to kill a British hostage unless the United Kingdom withdrew its forces.

In the video, aired Tuesday on al-Arabiya television, masked men holding assault rifles flanked one of five British citizens kidnapped from the Finance Ministry in Baghdad in May.

"Hello, my name is Jason and today is the 18th of November," said a man with a British accent who was seated on the ground wearing a tan jumpsuit. "I have been here now held for 173 days and I feel we have been forgotten."

The group, called the Shiite Islamic Resistance in Iraq, said it would kill the captive in 10 days unless British troops withdrew from Iraq, apologized to the Iraqi people and ended the presence of "fake companies and organizations" that "devour the body of Iraq and Iraqis."

"We condemn the publication of the video and we regard it as extremely unhelpful and distressing to the families," said Mark Bell, a spokesman for the British Embassy in Baghdad.

British officials declined to identify the men, a computer instructor and four bodyguards, or comment further about the kidnapping, saying further publicity would jeopardize behind-the-scenes work to secure their release.

But Iraqi officials said U.S. and British troops needed to remain in Iraq, and the cabinet voted to
ask the United Nations to authorize the U.S.-led forces to remain in the country until the end of next year, according to government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh.

"The renewal of this mandate will protect Iraq," said Dabbagh, who added that the cabinet vote did not need ratification by parliament. "There was really almost no discussion about it by the cabinet."

Also Tuesday, in the oil-rich northern city of Kirkuk, an Arab political bloc ended its year-long boycott of the provincial council, a step toward reconciliation sought by U.S. officials. Members of the Iraqi Republican Gathering agreed to return to the council in exchange for Arabs receiving nearly a third of the positions in local government.

"This is a big achievement for Kirkuk and brotherhood and peaceful living together," said Razgar ali Hamajan, a Kurd who is head of the Kirkuk provincial council.

The U.S. military announced that a U.S. soldier was killed by an explosion Monday in Anbar province. Two other service members were reported wounded.

Meanwhile in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, Iraqi and U.N. officials launched a program to assist about 30,000 refugees and internally displaced people, or IDPs, by giving them support packages and repair kits. The aid will be delivered by the United Nations, which will support the program with an initial contribution of $11 million.

The world body estimates that 40,000 refugees and 10,000 internally displaced people have returned to their homes, primarily in the Baghdad area. But it said it was "not encouraging or promoting the return of refugees or IDPs."

Sultan, the minister of displacement and migration, said the Iraqi government has allocated $100 million to help returning families and an additional $10 million to provide food for them.

Dec. 6 A3
US won’t shift Marines to Afghanistan
New York Times

Senior Pentagon and military officials said Wednesday that Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates had decided against a proposal to shift Marine Corps forces from Iraq to take the lead in American operations in Afghanistan.

Mr. Gates told top Marine Corps officials and his senior aides that the situation in western Iraq, where the Marines now operate in Anbar Province, remained too volatile to contemplate such a significant change in how the ground combat mission in Iraq is shared by the Army and the Marine Corps.

That broad message was underscored by Mr. Gates on Wednesday as he made his sixth visit to
Iraq as defense secretary.

During an evening news conference, Mr. Gates said the mission facing American, Iraqi and allied forces was to “work together not only to sustain the momentum of recent months, but to build on it.”

Senior Defense Department officials said Mr. Gates met at the Pentagon on Friday with Gen. James T. Conway, the Marine Corps commandant, and received a formal proposal that would shift Marine forces from Anbar Province and deploy them in Afghanistan.

The proposal was based on Marine Corps concepts in which an integrated “air-ground task force” of Marine infantry, attack aircraft and logistics could carry out the Afghanistan mission, and build on counterinsurgency lessons learned by marines in Anbar.

The idea also was based on an assessment that a realignment could allow the Army and the Marines each to operate more efficiently in sustaining troop levels for two wars that have put a strain on their forces.

“The secretary understands what the commandant is trying to do, and why the commandant wishes to transition the Marine Corps mission to Afghanistan,” Geoff Morrell, the Pentagon press secretary, said Wednesday during Mr. Gates’s visit to Baghdad. “But he doesn’t believe the time is now to do that. Anbar is still a volatile place.”

Senior military and Pentagon officials familiar with the discussion acknowledged that the Marine Corps proposal might eventually be adopted, although such a decision would be left up to the next defense secretary and military commanders.

At present, there are no major Marine units among the 26,000 or so American forces in Afghanistan. In Iraq, there are about 25,000 marines among the approximately 160,000 American troops.

In Washington on Wednesday, General Conway said that he felt the Afghan mission “is one that matches our strength and capabilities.” But he acknowledged that “it doesn’t appear that additional Marine units will be needed in Afghanistan in the near future.”

He added that “that’s not to say that in the future, were there additional U.S. troops needed, that we would or would not be called — that would be a determination made on what the nature of the request was at the time and what the availability of forces were between, probably, Army and Marines.”

When word first surfaced of the Marine Corps proposal in October, some officials in the Air Force expressed private fears that its mission in Afghanistan could be ended if the mission went to the Marines, who deploy with their own tactical fighter and attack combat aircraft.
Army officials acknowledged that the idea could streamline their force planning, by giving them only one mission to fulfill — although some Army officers also expressed wariness that the Marines were trying to move from an unpopular war, Iraq, to Afghanistan, which has more popular support.

Thus the idea was viewed by many military analysts as part of the maneuvering among the four armed services for priority combat missions, and the requisite share of the budget. There is widespread concern among Pentagon and military officials that the high level of military spending approved by Congress since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, may not be sustained by a nation that may move toward isolationism after Iraq.

Marine Corps officials said, however, that their proposal was based solely on military logic and efficiency.

Marine units train to fight in an air-ground task force. The term refers to a Marine deployment that arrives in a combat zone complete with its own headquarters, infantry combat troops, armored and transport vehicles, attack and transport helicopters, and attack jets for close-air support, as well as logistics and support personnel.


Dec. 7 A4
Iraqi parliament takes a breather
AP

Iraqi legislators suspended parliamentary sessions Thursday until the end of the month because of the Muslim religious season - the end of much-delayed efforts to pass U.S.-backed legislation aimed at achieving national reconciliation this year.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates, meanwhile, welcomed a report from his top commander in Iraq that violence has declined 60 percent in the last six months. But Gates warned that "people are getting impatient" for the Iraqi government to take advantage of improved security and move toward needed political reforms.

The Sunni speaker of parliament announced the decision to suspend sessions after days of debate over a draft bill that would allow thousands of former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party to return to their government jobs. The measure is among the 18 benchmarks set by the United States to encourage reconciliation.

Speaker Mahmoud al-Mashhadani said the legislative body would not hold another session until the end of December because many lawmakers would be traveling to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, for the annual Islamic pilgrimage.

Others were expected to leave the capital to spend Eid al-Adha, or the feast of sacrifice, with their families elsewhere in Iraq or abroad. The holiday begins around Dec. 20.

Al-Mashhadani said parliament would reconvene on Dec. 30, a day before the end of the current
term for the legislative body. It normally would recess for two months at that time, but legislators were expected to extend the term by a month so they could meet in January to pass a budget and other important measures, a senior U.S. official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Nevertheless, the suspension was the latest setback to efforts by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s Shiite-dominated government to bring minority Sunnis into the political process.

The 275-member parliament came under criticism over the summer for taking the month of August off despite the lack of progress on passing the legislation, including a law to ensure the equitable distribution of Iraq's oil riches.

Many lawmakers have residences in neighboring Jordan, and the chamber rarely holds a full house.

Before the legislature adjourned, a shouting match erupted when a Shiite lawmaker accused a powerful Sunni Arab politician of harboring sectarian sentiments against Iraq's Shiite majority.

The public outburst could renew calls by Shiite politicians that Adnan al-Dulaimi, the Sunni politician, be stripped of his parliamentary immunity to stand trial for inciting sectarian strife.

Iraqi forces have repeatedly raided al-Dulaimi’s offices in a western Baghdad neighborhood over the past week, arresting 42 people linked to the politician after one of his security guards was discovered with a key to an explosives-laden car.

The detained, who included al-Dulaimi’s son, are under criminal investigation, but the chief military spokesman, Brig. Gen. Qassim al-Moussawi, said the politician himself was not under suspicion.

Al-Dulaimi is the leader of the Iraqi Accordance Front, a three-party alliance with 44 seats in parliament, and he has been a harsh critic of al-Maliki, a Shiite. The Front’s six Cabinet ministers have pulled out of the government to protest the prime minister's policies.

The quarrel began when Bahaa al-Aaraji, a follower of radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, told the 275-seat house that he had evidence that al-Dulaimi branded Shiites "heretics" whose killing is legitimate.

Al-Aaraji said the evidence was in documents he held while addressing parliament, but declined to divulge their contents when he later spoke to reporters.

"Everything he said is nothing but lies," al-Dulaimi told reporters outside the chamber. "I am a well-known and a peaceful personality and I don't incite the killing of Shiites, Kurds or Sunnis. I dare anyone to prove otherwise."

Sunni-Shiite tensions soared after the bombing in February 2006 of a major Shiite shrine north of Baghdad. The bombing, blamed on Sunni militants, unleashed a wave of sectarian killings that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

U.S. officials had hoped that approval of the benchmark laws would help bridge the sectarian gap.
American officials began talking about benchmarks last year as a way to press the al-Maliki government to show tangible achievements in a bid to deflect calls in Congress for setting a timetable to withdraw U.S. forces.

Congress set 18 benchmarks and directed President Bush to provide progress reports in July and September as a condition for supporting the increasingly unpopular U.S. mission here.

The Iraqis have received mixed reviews in both reports, and the Americans have shifted their focus to supporting Sunnis at a grass-roots level as many tribal leaders and residents have joined forces against extremists, lowering the number of attacks to levels not seen since January 2006.

While the violence has declined, American commanders have warned extremists on both sides of the sectarian divide still pose a serious threat.

Gen. David Petraeus told Gates, who was visiting, that violence has declined 60 percent in the last six months. But Petraeus acknowledged that significant problem areas remain, including northern Iraq where some al-Qaida activity is on the rise.

Petraeus, who is scheduled to give Congress an update next March on progress in Iraq and map out some plans for U.S. force levels down the road, refused to offer too much optimism.

"Nobody says anything about turning a corner, seeing lights at the end of tunnels, any of those other phrases," said Petraeus. "You just keep your head down and keep moving."

Dec. 7 A7
Pentagon nails down details of control over contractors
AP

A new agreement between the Pentagon and the State Department gives the military in Iraq more control over Blackwater Worldwide and other private security contractors.

The agreement was signed Wednesday at the Pentagon by Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England and Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, whose department uses Blackwater to guard its diplomats. It spells out rules, standards and guidelines for the use of private security contractors.

The agreement also says contractors will be accountable for criminal acts under U.S. law. That partly clarifies what happens if a contractor breaks the law, but leaves the details to be worked out with Congress.

The move to tighten oversight followed Iraqi outrage over a Sept. 16 shooting in which 17 Iraq civilians were killed in a Baghdad square. Blackwater said its guards were protecting diplomats under attack before they opened fire, but Iraqi investigators concluded the shooting was unprovoked.

U.S. commanders on the ground in Iraq later complained that they often do not know security firms are moving through their areas of responsibility until after some hostile incident has taken
One of the chief features of the new accord is a provision giving the main U.S. military command in Iraq, known as Multi-National Force-Iraq, or MNF-I, more information on ground and air movements of private security contractors, regardless of whether they work for the embassy or the military.

The accord says all personal security units escorting U.S. government personnel must coordinate their movements with coordination centers of either the U.S. military or the embassy. In turn, movement details - to include time, route, destination and convoy composition - are to be provided by either of those coordination centers to a higher-level U.S. military command a minimum of 24 hours in advance.

The agreement says deadly force is authorized when a private security contractor "reasonably believes that a person has committed a hostile act or demonstrated hostile intent and poses an imminent threat of death or serious bodily harm to the personal security contractor."

When there is evidence of a crime, the embassy and the Pentagon "will make referrals to the appropriate prosecutorial authority," the agreement said. State and Defense departments will team up to help Congress establish a legal basis to hold security contractors "accountable under U.S. law."

A legal loophole has made it difficult or impossible to prosecute contractors under U.S. military or civilian law. A drunk contractor who killed an Iraqi security guard after a Green Zone Christmas party last year apparently has not been charged with a crime, although the case was sent to a federal prosecutor in the United States.

The loophole has roots in the U.S. provisional government that operated in Iraq immediately after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and has been an irritant in the U.S. relationship with the independent Iraq government that came later. Iraqi authorities have demanded that security contractors be accountable under Iraqi law, but the Bush administration opposes that.

There has been a string of repercussions since the September shootings by the North Carolina-based Blackwater:

-Iraqis have threatened to expel the company and have demanded the right to prosecute contractors.
-A federal grand jury is investigating whether criminal charges are warranted.

-Blackwater chairman Erik Prince was called before Congress and asserted his employees had "acted appropriately at all times," vigorously rejecting charges that guards from his company acted as if they were immune to legal prosecution.

-Richard Griffin, the assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, resigned just one day after a State Department study found serious lapses in the department's oversight of private guards.

In a meeting at the end of October, Defense Secretary Robert Gates met with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and reached a general understanding that more military control was needed over security firms operating in the war zone.

Rep. David Price, D-N.C., author of a House-passed bill that would subject all contractors to criminal liability, called Wednesday's agreement "an important step toward improving transparency, management and accountability in security contracting. There is no question that it comes in response to significant congressional pressure ... but the agencies deserve credit for reading the writing on the wall and taking substantive steps to deal with a clear and critical problem."

Dec. 9 A3
7 die in Baghdad
AP In Brief

A suicide truck bomber attacked a police station in one of Iraq’s major oil hubs Saturday, killing at least seven people and injury 13 in a neighborhood home to many refinery workers and engineers, police said. Elsewhere, 12 suspected al-Qaida in Iraq militants were killed and 13 detained in American raids, including one that ended with an airstrike on a palm grove where gunmen had taken up positions, the US military said. The incident in Beiji was at least the third deadly suicide attack in 24 hours in Iraq.

Dec. 9 A17
Democrats may stray the course
Washington Post

Facing increasing evidence of military progress in Iraq, some Democratic congressional leaders are eyeing a shift in legislative strategy that would abandon a link between $50 billion in additional war funding sought by President Bush to a timetable for withdrawal of U.S. troops. Instead, they would tie the measure to political advances by the Iraqi government.

For nearly a year, Democrats have tried unsuccessfully to use war funds to push timelines for troop withdrawals, troop-training requirements, and prescribed periods of rest for weary soldiers and Marines.
Now, House Democratic Caucus Chairman Rahm Emanuel (Ill.) is examining a new approach, releasing war funds in small increments, with further installments tied to specific performance measures for Iraq's politicians. House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.) also is searching for a new approach and has been briefed on the idea of more explicitly tying funds to political progress.

The new thrust has divided Democratic leaders on Capitol Hill, some of whom say they will never approve additional funding for the Iraq war without troop-withdrawal timelines. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) remains skeptical, House Democratic leadership sources said, and Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) has vacillated between seeking compromise with Republicans and holding firmly to troop-withdrawal language.

"We've been through all that," Reid said yesterday of the new approach, suggesting the war-funding issue will wait until January. "I just think we need to figure out some way to fund a government and move on to next year."

The new approach contains considerable political risks for Democrats. If they choose to adopt realistic measurements of political progress, they would be signaling a willingness to leave U.S. combat troops in Iraq far longer than Democratic voters want, said Michael O'Hanlon, a Democratic defense analyst at the Brookings Institution.

None of the leading contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination is likely to embrace that, said O'Hanlon, who suspended his ties to the campaign of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) after he wrote that Bush's troop buildup was yielding positive results.

On the other hand, the year-long struggle to mandate troop withdrawals shows no sign of progress. War funding will begin running dry by mid-February, leaving Democrats with the choice of withholding money for the war, providing the money without strings attached, or finding a new approach that can win bipartisan support.

The House approved a $50 billion war spending bill last month that would have tied additional funding to a goal of removing all combat troops from Iraq by December 2008, but it fell to a Republican filibuster in the Senate. Bush had promised to veto it anyway.

A separate war funding bill approved in the spring laid out political benchmarks for the Iraqis and demanded that the Bush administration return to Congress in September with an update on progress toward them. It showed that the Iraqi government was woefully short of meeting those goals.

The new approach will get an airing today when USA Today publishes an opinion piece by O'Hanlon. He argues that Democrats should receive more credit for the positive changes in Iraq and lays out a fresh set of benchmarks linked to the provision of funds.

O'Hanlon shook up the Iraq debate earlier this year when he co-wrote an opinion piece hailing the progress that has resulted from Bush's troop buildup. It also suggested that
Gen. David H. Petraeus's counterinsurgency strategy could stabilize Iraq.

He suggests, for instance, that Congress should judge political progress by how much money the central government in Baghdad is sharing with Iraq's provinces, and should recognize the ongoing de facto amnesty that Iraq's government is offering political opponents with the hiring of former insurgents as police officers and soldiers.

Emanuel suggested yesterday that the Bush administration's diplomatic outreach to Syria, its engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the new intelligence estimate on Iran's nuclear capabilities stem in part from the changing political climate brought on by the Democratic Congress.

"Our troops at every step of the way have done an incredible job," he told reporters. "And at every step of the way, the people that are responsible for a political strategy for Iraq have failed to deliver one. And our views on the funding is that what we need and what we've asked for from Day One is a set of benchmarks the Iraqis have to meet for Iraq."

Dec. 9 A23
US tries to return Iraqi pilots to sky
AP

Lt. Col. Mark Bennett never imagined he would fly a propeller plane over northern Iraq with a former member of Saddam Hussein's air force at his side.

Four years ago, Bennett screeched across Iraqi airspace in a B-1 bomber, dropping 2,000-pound bombs on runways and hangars at an Iraqi air base below. Now, he is back to rebuild the same Iraqi air force he helped disable during the 2003 U.S. invasion.

Bennett is one of more than 80 Americans training Iraqi pilots at a flight school inaugurated this week at this U.S. military base set up on the ruins of a Saddam Hussein-era air base. The goal is to restore the Iraqi air force _ once the sixth-largest in the world _ to at least part of its former glory.

The landscape here still bears the scars of U.S. bombing runs in 2003 _ craters in the runways and hangars roofs ripped open to the sky. Old Iraqi jet fighters decay in a gravel lot, near berms where Saddam's henchmen tried to bury them to elude U.S. detection in 2003.

A dozen Iraqi cadets began studying here in October in new classrooms and flight simulators built by Americans, training on helicopters as well as Cessna propeller planes affixed with surveillance cameras to watch insurgents below.

'Our objective is to help them build the air force into something that can assist in counterinsurgency operations _ through surveillance now, but also with light attack planes,' said Brig. Gen. Bob Allardice, who heads the Coalition Air Force Transition Team.
'Eventually, they'll help defend their borders, but they're not there yet,' said Allardice, a 49-year-old Takoma, Wash., native.

Half the students are already members of the Iraqi air force refreshing their skills and learning to be flight instructors themselves. The other six are recruits, many of them 25 years younger than their classmates.

The U.S. Air Force has been training seasoned Iraqi pilots since 2005, but the base in Kirkuk is the first to take recruits with no experience and to structure itself as a traditional flight school. The one-year course will accept new students quarterly.

Over the past four years, American military forces across Iraq have shifted their focus from first ousting Saddam and then combating insurgents, to training the Iraqi government and military to take over the job.

Violence has dropped sharply in recent months, and this year's 30,000-strong U.S. troop buildup is set to reverse next year. Such developments have spurred the Bush administration to put even more emphasis on transferring autonomy to Iraqis.

The mission shift is particularly acute for Bennett, who flew 15-hour combat missions over Iraq in 2003 and now finds himself forming steadfast friendships with the Iraqi pilots he trains.

'The B-1 is a symbol of air power, and of weapon strength. Now I'm flying a Cessna _ a symbol of training and guidance,' said Bennett, a 39-year-old San Antonio, Texas, resident who commands the 52nd Expeditionary Flying Training Squadron. 'Frankly, I like this role better.'

By the time of the 2003 invasion, Iraq's air force had already deteriorated immensely. Much of its fleet was destroyed by the U.S. during the 1991 Gulf War. Afterward, economic sanctions made repair parts nearly impossible to acquire.

And many of the Iraqi pilots _ by then in their 40s and 50s _ had not gripped the controls of a plane since the U.S.-imposed no-fly zone made it illegal for them to take to the skies over large swaths of their country after the 1991 war.

'We were stagnant for so many years,' said Col. Kareem Ali, who left Iraq's air force in 1995 and then rejoined after Saddam's ouster.

'I had to leave, but it wasn't because I didn't love my job _ I love to fly. It was because I couldn't fly missions anymore,' the 43-year-old Baghdad native said.

At its strongest in the 1980s, the Iraqi air force was trained by the Soviets and had about 18,000 pilots and more than 1,000 fighter planes, according to Ali and Col. Abdul-Karim Aziz, the wing commander of three Iraqi air force units. Now, the force has approximately 1,500 personnel and 50 aircraft _ mostly small propeller planes and helicopters.

'Many of my friends took other jobs as businessmen or contractors. They had to make a
living,' the 48-year-old Aziz said, shrugging.

For Bennett, who trains U.S. pilots in Texas when he is not deployed overseas, the most rewarding experience in Iraq was not demonstrating American firepower in 2003. It was flying a Cessna to Baghdad recently, he said, with an Iraqi colonel as co-pilot, pointing out familiar towns below.

'When you get up in the air with these guys, it's no different than with my students back home _ you see that love of flying,' Bennett said.

'For my Iraqi colleague, this is a difficult time for his family and his country. But when you get airborne, you leave those stresses behind,' he said. 'It all melts away.'

Dec. 9 A23
Security crews not ready to leave Iraq
Los Angeles Times

The security contractor settled into the back of the armored Mercedes parked under the crossed-swords monument, and contemplated the question: If the Iraqi government follows through with its plan to withdraw legal immunity for private guards operating in the country, would he continue to work here?

"I can tell you there's a lot of guys that are worried about it," said the burly former policeman, now in his fourth year in Iraq. He works for an American company that guards high-level U.S. military officials on daily missions around Baghdad. But, he added, "I get paid a hell of a lot of money to be here. I'm in their country, and I need to respect that.

"It's not going to make a difference in how I operate, and it's absolutely not going to cause me to leave," he said.

So it goes for the legions of armed guards that make up the private security forces in Iraq. In the wake of a number of recent shootings, most notably the Sept. 16 incident involving the security firm Blackwater USA that left 17 Iraqis dead and 24 wounded, public rage has boiled over and the government has aggressively been pursuing new efforts to bring private guards under control. Chief among them is to withdraw the immunity from prosecution in Iraqi courts that had been bestowed on the contractors by the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority that helped set up the new Iraqi government after Saddam Hussein was ousted.

Prime Minister Nouri Maliki's Cabinet has approved the immunity rescission, and it awaits adoption by the parliament. But on Nov. 19, the Iraqi government signaled the seriousness of the intent to move forward with the new oversight, arresting 43 people involved with a security convoy that shot and wounded a pedestrian as she crossed a street in the Baghdad neighborhood of Karada.

In interviews with the Los Angeles Times, an executive and four guards from four companies in
the secretive world of security contracting agreed to share their thoughts about the impending crackdown on the grounds that neither they nor their firms' identities would be disclosed.

Generally, there was a sense of resignation among the guards about the immunity repeal and a reluctant acknowledgment that it is probably necessary, because the legal protection appeared to have given some a sense of impunity -- or, at a minimum, a willingness to cut corners when it came to following rules of engagement or escalation of force. None said they believed they would receive a fair trial in an Iraqi court, but none said they would quit the business and leave the country, either.

"From an individual point of view, I don't think there will be a great reaction, because a lot of operators live for the day or the week, and as long as the money's there, there will always be people willing to work in this environment," said another contractor, who works for a British firm. Losing immunity "does make people think twice, but when you bear in mind the personal risk people take in working here, it's probably low down on their list of priorities," he said.

Among some, there was also frustration -- with the high-profile American security firms, particularly Blackwater, whom they accuse of an over-aggressive attitude that creates more problems than necessary -- and with Iraqis who they say continue to approach convoys rapidly and provoke guards to fire despite more than four years of warnings. Some said the U.S. government had not done enough to strike a balance that would hold contractors accountable for unjustified shootings while also ensuring complaints would be heard fairly. And one said the debate over security firm conduct was a luxury afforded by the newfound stability in the country, and one that wasn't even contemplated when hundreds of Iraqis died on a daily basis.

Though the guards expressed a willingness to continue working despite the new legal risk, the executive -- who works for an American firm under contract with the U.S. government -- said the company would have to reexamine whether it would remain in Iraq if immunity for its guards was withdrawn. In two cases, the firm's guards fired on, and disabled, vehicles that turned out to be car bombs driven by suicide attackers. But the company also has been accused of killing drivers who were found to pose no risk.

"We have to seriously think about whether we could do business in Iraq under those conditions," the executive said. "I think under normal conditions no company would have a problem with its employees being accountable to local law. But the reason we're in Iraq is because normal conditions don't exist."

One contractor said the U.S. might have to hire private guards and make them government employees so they would continue to receive diplomatic immunity. Some companies are said to be considering installing video cameras on convoy vehicles to support their contentions that incidents involving the use of force occur in response to threats.

The contractors operate under difficult and dangerous circumstances, guarding high-profile diplomats and military officials who would be prime targets for insurgents. Threats can lurk anywhere, hidden amid the chaos of Baghdad's streets.
In theory, contractors are supposed to follow rules that call for verbal and visual warnings, warning shots, and shots intended to disable vehicles before resorting to lethal force. But in an unpredictable environment where attacks can unfold in seconds, contractors must sometimes abandon interim steps to act fast.

In one year, the contractor under the crossed-swords monument said, he had to fire only two warning shots. But then, in one afternoon, he had to return fire three separate times when his convoy came under attack. Still, he said, he trusted his training and instincts enough to do the right thing.

"If it's done according to the rules of engagement, you will know that," he said. "You will know that you did the right thing."

His colleague, who also came to the meeting under the crossed swords, said immunity had allowed some contractors to skip the interim steps because they would never have to defend their actions.

"Immunity puts you in an untenable position," he said. "We should all be able to be answerable to the law. If people aren't accountable, it becomes easy. It's the easiest thing in the world to let everything go and shoot people in Iraq."

Some say contractors' own comportment determines how much of a target they or their charges are. By keeping a low profile, following the rules and doing enough intelligence research to know where threats exist and avoid them, security contractors can do their jobs safely and rarely need to resort to force, said a fourth guard, who has been in the country for more than three years.

In the previous year, his firm moved 1,200 clients -- engineers and other workers involved in development projects -- more than 50,000 miles, and had been involved in just two incidents, neither fatal.

But some firms, they say, choose to operate in a way that invites attention, and puts them in a position of having to use force. The fourth contractor said he had a run-in with a Blackwater convoy in which the firm's guards ran him off the road and brandished a weapon at him, even though he had just passed a checkpoint inside a secure area and was clearly not a risk.

"What I've seen happen here is some of the companies are taking the law into their own hands," he said. "That is not the right thing. We've already got enough enemies in the country, and we don't need more enemies."

He said he recognized the need for tighter regulation of the industry, even as he believed the new rules would be slanted against contractors.

"People can't do whatever they want," he said. "There has to be control. And that goes for everybody. But don't think you'll get a fair trial under Iraqi law. They don't want us here."
Venezuelan leader pledges partnership with Iran

Venezuela's outspoken president joined with Iran's leader Monday in boasting that they are "united like a single fist" in challenging American influence, saying the fall of the dollar is a sign that "the U.S. empire is coming down."

Hugo Chavez also joked about the most serious issue the U.S. is confronting regarding Iran - nuclear weapons - during his get-together with Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The visit came after a failed attempt by the firebrand duo to move OPEC away from pricing its oil in dollars.

OPEC's weekend summit displayed the limits of their alliance - their proposal was overruled by other members, led by Saudi Arabia - but it also showed their potential for stirring up problems for the U.S. and its allies.

Making his fourth trip to Tehran in two years, Chavez has built a strong bond with Ahmadinejad that has produced a string of business agreements as well as a torrent of rhetoric presenting their two countries as an example of how smaller nations can stand up to the U.S.

"Here are two brother countries, united like a single fist," Chavez said upon his arrival in Tehran, according to Venezuela's state-run Bolivarian News Agency.

"God willing, with the fall of the dollar, the deviant U.S. imperialism will fall as soon as possible, too," Chavez said after a two-hour closed meeting with Ahmadinejad, the Iranian state news agency IRNA reported.

As the dollar weakens, oil prices have soared toward $100 a barrel. Chavez said at the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries' meeting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, that prices would more than double to $200 if the U.S. attacked Iran or Venezuela.

"The U.S. empire is coming down," he told Venezuelan state television, calling the European Union's euro a better option and saying Latin American nations were also considering a common currency.

The leftist leader is a harsh critic of President Bush, while Iran's Islamic government is in a bitter standoff with Washington over Tehran's nuclear program. The U.S. accuses Iran of seeking to develop nuclear weapons, a claim Tehran denies, and Iran has been hit with two rounds of U.N. sanctions for refusing to suspend uranium enrichment.
Although it's a sensitive issue for his ally, Chavez joked about acquiring his own atomic bombs, apparently seeking to poke fun at the U.S. accusation that Iran is using its nuclear program as a cover to develop nuclear weapons.

According to a Venezuelan state TV report, when a reporter asked about the aims of his visit, Chavez quipped: "As the imperialist press says, I came to look for an atomic bomb, and I've got it here. If anyone should cross me, I'll fire it."

The report didn't say how Ahmadinejad reacted to the joke.

Chavez has strongly supported Iran's right to have a civilian nuclear program, backing the position of Tehran that its atomic activities are intended solely for the peaceful production of electricity.

"We demand respect for the sovereignty of Iran," Chavez told Venezuelan TV when he arrived for his hours-long visit. "Iran has a right to have nuclear energy for peaceful uses."

Ahmadinejad backed his "dear brother" Chavez in their joint fight with the Bush administration.

"We have common viewpoints and we will stand by each other until we capture the high peaks. God is with us and victory is awaiting us," he was quoted as saying by IRNA.

During the OPEC meeting, Iran and Venezuela proposed that the cartel begin setting its oil prices based on a basket of currencies, rather than just the dollar, and they wanted the summit to specifically express concern over the dollar's slide in its final statement.
administration official grudgingly acknowledged. And it will raise questions, again, about the integrity of America’s beleaguered intelligence agencies, including whether what are now acknowledged to have been overstatements about Iran’s intentions in a 2005 assessment reflected poor tradecraft or political pressure.

Seldom do those agencies vindicate irascible foreign leaders like President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, who several weeks ago said there was “no evidence” that Iran was building a nuclear weapon, dismissing the American claims as exaggerated.

The biggest change, though, could be its effect on President Bush’s last year in office, as well as on the campaign to replace him. Until Monday, 2008 seemed to be a year destined to be consumed, at least when it comes to foreign policy, by the prospects of confrontation with Iran.

There are still hawks in the administration, Vice President Dick Cheney chief among them, who view Iran with deep suspicion. But for now at least, the main argument for a military conflict with Iran — widely rumored and feared, judging by antiwar protesters that often greet Mr. Bush during his travels — is off the table for the foreseeable future.

As Senator Chuck Hagel, Republican of Nebraska, put it, the intelligence finding removes, “if nothing else, the urgency that we have to attack Iran, or knock out facilities.” He added: “I don’t think you can overstate the importance of this.”

The White House struggled to portray the estimate as a validation of Mr. Bush’s strategy, a contention that required swimming against the tide of Mr. Bush’s and Mr. Cheney’s occasionally apocalyptic language.

The national security adviser, Stephen J. Hadley, said the estimate showed that suspicions about Iran’s intentions were warranted, given that it had a weapons program in the first place.

“One balance, the estimate is good news,” Mr. Hadley said, appearing at the White House. “On one hand, it confirms that we were right to be worried about Iran seeking to develop nuclear weapons. On the other hand, it tells us that we have made some progress in trying to ensure that that does not happen. But it also tells us that the risk of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon remains a very serious problem.”

Mr. Hadley insisted, as he and others have, that the administration had hoped and still hoped to resolve the outstanding questions about Iran’s nuclear programs using diplomacy, not force. But the nuances of his on-this-hand-on-the-other argument will probably make it much harder to persuade American allies to accept the administration’s harder line.

One official pointed out that the chief American diplomat on the Iran question, Under Secretary of State R. Nicholas Burns, had just met with counterparts from Europe, Russia and China, and had seemed to make some headway on winning support for a third round of sanctions by the United Nations Security Council. The official said Mr. Burns could not divulge the intelligence findings at that meeting on Friday because Congress had not been briefed.
The immediate task for Mr. Burns and other administration officials is to untangle the confusion caused by its own statements and findings and to persuade skeptics that this time, the United States has it right about what Iran was doing before 2003 and what that means for what it might do in the future.

“The way this will play is that the intelligence community has admitted it was wrong,” said Jon B. Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “So why should we believe them now?”

Mr. Hadley said the drastic reversal in the intelligence agencies’ knowledge about Iran’s weapons programs was based “on new intelligence, some of which has been received in the last few months.”

He also said that he and other senior officials, including Mr. Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, had reviewed it and debated it two weeks ago.

With some of the administration’s most prominent hawks having departed and not taking part in the review of findings like these, it is possible that the zeal for another military conflict has diminished. After all, the first two wars on Mr. Bush’s watch remain unresolved at best.

Senator Hagel said he hoped that the administration might in its final year in office show the kind of diplomatic flexibility it did with North Korea over its nuclear weapons or with the conference in Annapolis, Md., last week on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He has previously called for the United States to open direct and unconditional talks with Iran to end the state of enmity that has existed since 1979.

He said Iran’s halt of weapons activity had created an opening for such talks, indicating, as the assessment does, that Iran’s government may be more rational than the one that Mr. Bush said in August had threatened to put the entire region “under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust.”

“If we’re wise here, if we’re careful, I think we have some opportunities,” Mr. Hagel said.

The findings, though, remain open for interpretation, as they always do, even in documents meant to reflect the consensus of the intelligence community. When it comes to Iran, at odds with the United States on many fronts beyond the nuclear question, hawks remain.

“Those who are suspicious of diplomacy are well dug in this administration,” said Kurt M. Campbell, chief executive officer of the Center for a New American Security.

John R. Bolton, the former ambassador to the United Nations, who recently left the administration and began to criticize it, sounded very much like Mr. Hadley on Monday, saying the assessment underscored the need for American toughness. He said Iran’s
intentions would always remain a concern as long as it continued to enrich uranium.

“The decision to weaponize and at what point is a judgment in the hands of the Iranians,” he said. He added that the finding that Iran halted a weapons program could just mean that it was better hidden now.

Dec. 5 A3
Bush unfazed by new Iran report
New York Times

President Bush warned on Tuesday that Iran remained a threat despite an intelligence assessment that it had halted a covert program to develop nuclear weapons four years ago, as the administration struggled to save a diplomatic process now in disarray.

Once again facing criticism over the handling — and meaning — of intelligence reports, Mr. Bush said the new assessment underscored the need to intensify international efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

He said Iran could not be entrusted with acquiring even the scientific knowledge to enrich uranium for peaceful civilian use, explicitly declaring for the first time what has been an underlying premise of the administration’s policy. He also appeared to rule out any new diplomatic initiative with the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

“Look, Iran was dangerous, Iran is dangerous, and Iran will be dangerous, if they have the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon,” Mr. Bush said during a news conference dominated by questions about the fallout of the assessment, known as a National Intelligence Estimate. “What’s to say they couldn’t start another covert nuclear weapons program?”

The assessment reversed one in 2005 that asserted that Iran was “determined to develop nuclear weapons,” with American intelligence agencies now saying that they do not know whether Iran intends to take that step.

Mr. Bush said the reversal was based on “a great discovery” by American intelligence agencies, but neither he nor other officials would elaborate. Current and former American and foreign officials said the new findings were based on intercepted communications and accounts provided by individuals with access to information about Iran’s nuclear program.

Ahmandinejad today called the report a “declaration of victory” for Iran’s nuclear program.

“This was a final shot to those who, in the past several years, spread a sense of threat and concern in the world through lies of nuclear weapons,” he told thousands of people during a visit to Ilam province in western Iran.

“Thanks to your resistance, a fatal shot was fired at the dreams of ill-wishers and the truthfulness
of the Iranian nation was once again proved by the ill-wishers themselves,” he said, drawing celebratory whistles from the crowd.

Representative Jane Harman, a Democrat of California, said she read the classified version of the report on Tuesday and described the intelligence agencies’ work as “a sea change” from the 2005 assessment in the quality of its analysis and presentation of facts. Asked about the basis for the new findings, she said: “I think we have some better sourcing. That’s all I can say.”

Mr. Bush’s remarks did little to silence critics, who have accused him of hyping the case for confronting Iran. Nor did it ease concerns of some allies.

Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a Republican, said he was perplexed by the new assessment and suspicious of the new evidence. “We should all look under the hood of these intelligence reports,” he said.

Mr. Bush and his senior aides spent the day trying to hold together the already fragile coalition of world powers seeking to rein in Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Mr. Bush telephoned President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, who has voiced skepticism about an aggressive American effort to punish and isolate Iran.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also telephoned her counterparts from the five other countries that have been pursuing United Nations sanctions against Iran to urge that the coalition continue work on a new round of increasingly tighter sanctions.

“This report is not an ‘O.K., everybody needs to relax and quit’ report,” Mr. Bush said. “This is a report that says what has happened in the past could be repeated and that the policies used to cause the regime to halt are effective policies. And let’s keep them up. Let’s continue to work together.”

There were already signs that that effort had been complicated by the new report. R. Nicholas Burns, the under secretary of state for political affairs, held a teleconference call Tuesday morning with his counterparts from France, Germany, China, Britain and Russia.

“We’re all flabbergasted,” one European diplomat said of the report generally. “You get such a surprise, and then you sit together and consider how to move forward. To be on safe ground, we decided to keep moving forward” with the effort to press for further sanctions.

A senior administration official said the intelligence assessment on Iran was a setback in the effort to persuade China to endorse a new round of sanctions at the United Nations Security Council. While there had been indications over the weekend that the Chinese might drop their opposition to such a move, it appeared on Tuesday that they were reconsidering again, the official said.

The new intelligence assessment, the official said, “gives the Chinese an opportunity to get
off the hook.”

Mr. Bush opened himself to new criticism over his credibility when he said that the director of national intelligence, Mike McConnell, alerted him about new intelligence about Iran’s weapons program in August but did not explain what it was in detail.

As recently as October, Mr. Bush continued to warn darkly of Iran’s nuclear weapons threat, invoking World War III, despite the new information. He responded to a question about that on Tuesday by saying he had received the final assessment, with its drastically altered findings, only last week.

“That’s not believable,” said Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr. of Delaware, the Democrat who is chairman of the foreign relations committee and a candidate for president. “I refuse to believe that. If that’s true, he has the most incompetent staff in American, modern American history and he’s one of the most incompetent presidents in modern American history.”

While many officials, lawmakers and diplomats focused on the halting of Iran’s weapons program, Mr. Bush emphasized the report’s finding that “a growing amount of intelligence indicates Iran was engaged in covert uranium conversion and uranium enrichment activity” from the late 1980s until the freezing of that effort in 2003. Mr. Bush’s senior aides describe that as the first evidence of what many officials had only suspected.

“And so I view this report as a warning signal that they had the program,” Mr. Bush said. “They halted the program. And the reason why it’s a warning signal is that they could restart it.”

Critics, though, blamed the administration’s hard line and harsh language for compounding Iran’s determination and undermining diplomatic efforts. They called on the administration to make a more concerted diplomatic effort to persuade Iran’s government to abide by its commitments to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

“Theyir actions have been totally self-defeating,” Mr. Biden said of the Bush administration. “Every time they rattle the saber, what happens is the security premium for oil goes up. It raises the price of oil. It puts more money in the pocket of Ahmadinejad and the very people we think are the bad guys.”

Mr. Bush maintained that the administration had made offers to Iran as part of the European Union’s diplomatic efforts as long ago as 2003, including promising American support for membership in the World Trade Organization and an easing of sanctions to allow the sale of spare airplane parts.

“What changed was the change of leadership in Iran,” he said, referring to the elections in Iran in 2005. “We had a diplomatic track going, and Ahmadinejad came along and took a different tone. And the Iranian people must understand that the tone and actions of their
Flynt Leverett, a Middle East expert at the New America Foundation who served on the National Security Council under Mr. Bush, said the president had consistently ruled out any real entreaty to Iran that could resolve the international deadlock over its nuclear ambitions.

“The really uncomfortable part for the administration, aside from the embarrassment, is the policy implication,” Mr. Leverett said of the assessment. “The dirty secret is the administration has never put on the table an offer to negotiate with Iran the issues that would really matter: their own security, the legitimacy of the Islamic republic and Iran’s place in the regional order.”
Appendix B

Iraq Briefs

Nov. 12   A3
Contractor gunfire called unprovoked
AP In Brief

An Iraqi taxi driver was shot and killed Saturday by a guard from private security contractor DynCorp International when a DynCorp convoy rolled past a knot of traffic on an exit ramp, the Iraqi Interior Ministry said Sunday. Three eyewitnesses said the taxi posed no threat to the convoy, and an Iraqi army sergeant who inspected the car afterward said it contained no weaponry or explosive devices.

Nov. 17   A9
Clare County soldier killed
AP in Brief

Lux Funeral Home will handle one of its own when the body of Pfc. Casey Mason returns from Iraq.

The 22-year-old from the Clare County community of Lake went to work at Lux Funeral Home after graduating from Farwell High School. He joined the Army last year and was assigned to a military police unit based at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

Mason was killed Tuesday when enemy forces attacked his unit in Mosul, Iraq.

“The last thing I told him was to come home safe,” funeral home owner Charlie Lux said. “No one ever dreamed this would happen.”

Nov. 17   A9
US soldiers deserting at higher rate
AP In Brief

Soldiers strained by six years at war are deserting their posts at the highest rate since 1980, with the number of Army deserters this year showing an 80 percent increase since the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. While the totals are still far lower than they were during the Vietnam War, when the draft was in effect, they show a steady increase over the past four years and a 42-percent jump since last year. The Army defines a deserter as someone who has been absent without leave for longer than 30 days. The soldier is then discharged as a deserter. According to the Army, about nine in every 1,000 soldiers deserted in fiscal year 2007, which ended Sept. 30,
compared to nearly sever per 1,000 a year earlier. Overall, 4,698 soldiers deserted this year, compared to 3,301 last year.

Nov. 18   A3
Mass grave found
AP in Brief

Remains of possibly dozens of people believed slain in sectarian violence were unearthed Saturday from a mass grave in a former al-Qaida stronghold in southern Baghdad – the third such find in Iraq this month. The badly decomposed remains were found in an area overlooking the main highway leading to Shiite shrine cities.

Nov. 19   A3
US admits deaths
AP In Brief

Two Iraqis were killed and four wounded in an incident involving a US military convoy in a southern province, American officials said. Local officials said the soldiers had opened fire randomly. A spokesman for the Muthanna provincial council said US soldiers opened fire Sunday on a group of cars on the highway between the cities of Samawah and Rumaitha.

Nov. 23   A3
Al-Qaida attacks Sunnis
AP In Brief

Al-Qaida militants commandeered Iraqi army vehicles, then attacked US-backed Sunni fighters in south Baghdad during a fierce gunbattle that left 18 people dead Thursday, police and local Sunnis said. Later Thursday, mortars or rockets slammed into the US protected Green Zone. The dead included eight members of the US-backed group and seven al-Qaida suspects in addition to the three Iraqi soldiers, according to police and local Sunni leaders.

Nov. 26   A3
Iraqi Shiite leader defends Iran
AP In Brief

Iraq’s most influential Shiite politician said Sunday the US has not backed up claims Iran is fueling violence here, underscoring a wide gap on the issue between Washington and the Shiite-led Baghdad government. A draft bill to ease curbs on ex-Saddam Hussein loyalists in government services also drew sharp criticism from Shiite lawmakers, opening old wounds at a time when the United States is pressing the Iraqis for compromise for the sake of national unity.
Nov. 27        A3
US-Iraq deal sets lasting presence
AP In Brief

President Bush on Monday signed a deal setting the foundation for a potential long-term US troop presence in Iraq, with details to be negotiated over matters that have defined the war debate at home – how many US forces will stay in the country, and for how long. The agreement with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki confirms the US and Iraq will hash out an “enduring” military, economic and political relationship. Details will be negotiated in 2008.

Dec. 2        A12
Iraqi death toll falls again
AP In Brief

The number of Iraqis killed last month fell to 718, an Associated Press tally showed, the lowest monthly death toll since just before the 2006 bombing of a Shiite shrine provoked a vicious cycle of retaliatory sectarian violence. The figures come as the military says violence has fallen to levels not seen in nearly two years, while acknowledging that Iraqis are still dying in unacceptable numbers.

Iran Briefs

Nov. 11       B-2
No need for edict on Iran policy

First, U.S. Rep. Vern Ehlers was targeted by an anti-war group called Americans Against Escalation in Iraq. They pressured Ehlers to change his stance on the war, part of a national campaign focused on select members of Congress. Now, another liberal advocacy group is dialing up residents and urging them to demand Ehlers stop the Bush administration from going to war with Iran. Ehlers said he can spare them the effort. "There is no way I want to go to war with Iran. There is probably nothing to be gained by us attacking Iran."

Nov. 21       A7
Iran foresees no new sanctions
AP In Brief

Iran’s UN envoy said Tuesday he does not expect new UN sanctions anytime soon because it is cooperating with the UN nuclear watchdog, and Russia and China are supporting the process. Ambassador Mohammad Khazaee said last week’s report from the International Atomic Energy Agency found that Tehran was generally truthful about aspects of its nuclear history was “a very positive one.”
Iran has ordered Canada’s ambassador to leave the country, the Canadian foreign minister said late Monday, calling the move unjustifiable. Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier suggested that the expulsion of Ambassador John Mundy was a tit-for-tat move by Tehran, “Unfortunately, we have as yet been unable to accept the candidates Tehran has submitted,” Bernier said, without elaboration.
Appendix C

Sources Cited in Iraq Stories:

US Sources

US Military – 22
Bush – 1
White House spokesperson – 3
US Iraq War veteran – 2
US Defense Secretary Gates – 2
Hence Representative Henry A. Waxman, Dem. – 2
State Department Inspector General – 2
Walter Reed Army Institute of Research spokesperson – 1
Representative David E. Price, a North Carolina Democrat - 2
Un-named US official – 1
House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. – 1
Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev. – 2
Michigan funeral home owner – 1
Blackwater CEO Erik Prince – 1
Former Blackwater Advisory Board member – 1
US Military family – 2

Iraqi Sources

Iraqi military – 2
Iraqi Insurgent - 1
Iraqi Government official – 3
Iraqi businessman – 1
Iraqi civilian - 2

International Sources

British prisoner of Insurgents - 1
British Embassy spokesperson – 1

Unknown Sources
Sources Cited in Iran Stories:

Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – 2
President Bush - 1
Iranian Ambassador to the UN – 1
Senator Chuck Hagel, Rep. Nebraska - 1
US National Security Advisor – 1
Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister – 1
Appendix D

Iraq Coverage Data

Total # of stories – 42
Briefs - 10
Full Stories – 32

News Sources:

Associated Press - 13
Washington Post - 6
Los Angeles Times – 5
New York Times - 4
Grand Rapids Press – 3
Press Wire Service – 1

Story Focus:

US Military Strategy – 10
Violence in Iraq – 9
Blackwater/contractors – 6
US Political Debate – 5
Iraq - 5
Local – 4
Other – 2
International Community – 1

Iran Coverage Data

Total # of stories – 6
Briefs - 3
Full Stories – 3

News Sources:

Associated Press – 3