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Editorial

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It's quite clear that President Bush intends to exit office in nine months leaving a solution to the war in Iraq to his successor. Bush will probably leave at least two other big but less deadly problems - a faltering economy and record gasoline prices - on the White House table as well.

Bush last week said that Gen. David Petraeus, the top commander in Iraq, can take "all the time he needs" to consider troop cutbacks after a round scheduled for July. That's a clear indication Bush is in no hurry to clean up a big mess that's into its sixth year.

About the only thing Bush has agreed on, in terms of winding things down, is trimming three months from Army combat tours, taking them from 15 to 12 months. But Army units already deployed to the front lines won't benefit from that change.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., says, "President Bush has an exit strategy for only one man, himself, on January 20, 2009."

Given the Bush administration's lack of progress in turning Iraq over to all those freedom-loving Iraqis, it would be hard to argue that point.

U.S. Rep. John P. Murtha, D-Johnstown, a local congressman and early proponent of redeploying troops stationed in Iraq, asks a very pertinent question: "Why, after five years, \$535 billion, over 4,000 American lives lost and nearly 30,000 wounded, can't the Iraqi government control their own destiny?"

Murtha then answers his own question, in terms that now seem hard to dispute: "Because they won't, as long as we are there. That is what the surge in fact proves."

Murtha believes the surge - a racheting up of the U.S. military presence - has reduced violence but "proves there is no military solution in Iraq." He notes that our military cannot guarantee Iraqi economic progress or government efficacy. Yet in many ways that's the job it is being expected to do.

Despite very little evidence that the Iraqis, long extricated from the chains of dictator Saddam Hussein, are ready to take over their own nation, Bush continues to frame the situation in regard to how our military views itself.

"The surest way to depress morale and weaken the force would be to lose in Iraq," says the president.

We would argue that those troops in Iraq, some in their third or fourth tour of duty, and many burning out from longer and more frequent tours than they ever anticipated, might already be suffering from depressed morale.

Especially when they keep dying and getting wounded years after the job they were trained to perform was easily accomplished by vanquishing Hussein's army.

Bush is counting on someone else to clean up his mess.