

# Howard's bubble diplomacy shows he's off on Iraq

Barack Obama is right: the war plan is not working, says **BRETT BOWDEN**

**T**HE AUSTRALIAN Government's ill-considered attack on Democrat US presidential hopeful Senator Barack Obama was remarkable for a number of reasons. The most obvious being the fact that it happened.

No possible good can come from it and the real harm might not be known until it returns to haunt a future government. Perhaps more disturbing, though, are the disingenuous justifications being offered in defence of the attack and the simultaneous deflection of blame for the calamitous state of affairs in Iraq.

If elected president, Obama has pledged to conditionally withdraw all US combat troops from Iraq. He hopes he won't have to wait that long as he is introducing binding legislation that he hopes will force President George W. Bush to do the same by March 2008. The tactic is unlikely to work, but it will have its supporters.

If Obama is lucky enough to make it to the White House, the Iraq mess will still be waiting for him. His announcement is

noteworthy for the fact he is only talking about combat troops.

The real intrigue lies in what else he has in mind. Could it be any worse than the current directionless policy? The key elements of the Obama plan are not too far removed from those proposed by the bipartisan Iraq Survey Group: de-escalation of the war, tough benchmarks for the Iraqi Government, increased security, and economic and infrastructure reconstruction. He is explicitly not talking about a precipitous, unconditional withdrawal.

Prime Minister John Howard is concerned that to even talk about deadlines and exit strategies emboldens al-Qaeda in Iraq and weakens the US in the eyes of the world. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer fears that a precipitous withdrawal will leave a vacuum waiting to be filled by

insurgents and terrorists. They accuse Obama of failing to grasp the intricacies of Iraq and just how much is at stake there.

For all the concerns over Obama's lack of foreign policy experience, it appears as though he has the edge over Howard and Downer when it comes to the realities of Iraq. He knows the war is going badly no matter which way you try to spin it. He knows more than 3100 US troops have died in a war he opposed from the outset. He knows there is no security, there is minimal government and there are few prospects of achieving any of these by staying the course. And he knows he's not alone in his thinking.

Howard and Downer, on the other hand, appear to be living in a bubble. They speak about destabilising and destroying Iraq in the future tense as though they are oblivious to the daily carnage going on

there. By their reckoning, should such a terrible thing befall Iraq the fault lies not at the feet of the Bush Administration and its coalition partners, but with Obama and the Democrats.

No doubt there is enough blame to go around to sheet some of it home to Kevin Rudd and the Labor Party as well.

The problem with Howard and Downer's reasoning on this issue is that it is so clearly wrong.

There was no al-Qaeda in Iraq prior to the invasion and occupation. There was no link between Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist network and the regime of Saddam Hussein.

The turmoil in Iraq is generated by the presence of coalition troops – insurgents and foreign terrorists have materialised since the invasion.

This much has been widely conceded by

all but the most diehard supporters of the war in Washington and, apparently, Canberra.

If Howard really was running al-Qaeda in Iraq he would be wise to put a circle around March 2008, and January 20, 2009, the date of inauguration of the next US president.

Whether it's Senator Obama or another Democrat or even a Republican like former New York City Mayor Rudi Giuliani entering the White House the odds are that things will change in Iraq.

Whether the change is for the better or worse is difficult to predict. Although imagining how things could get much worse than they are now is not easy.

It is high time the Howard Government took its share of the blame and accepted some of the responsibility for the mess.

■ Dr Brett Bowden is a Research Fellow in the Centre for International Governance & Justice at the Australian National University.