Democratic Candidates Find Themselves Caught in a Hole of Their Own
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Pity the poor Democratic presidential candidates. They're really in a bind: They have no choice but to join in the international rejoicing over the capture of the Butcher of Baghdad, but at the same time they can't simply offer blanket approval for President Bush's Iraq policy. With the economy picking up steam and Bush stealing their best issue with his Medicare bill, they can't afford to give up this all-important area in which to criticize the incumbent. But what can they say when the situation in Iraq appears to be looking up?

Pretty much all of them have been reduced to the same rhetorical trope. Howard Dean: "We must do everything possible to bring the U.N., NATO and other members of the international community back into this effort." John Edwards: "I hope President Bush will use this opportunity to chart a course in Iraq that will bring in our allies in a meaningful way to achieve a democratic and peaceful Iraq." John Kerry: "We need to share the burden, bring in other countries and make it clear to the world that Iraq belongs to the Iraqi people." Even Joe Lieberman, the most stalwart defender of the war effort, joined in: "We've got to seize this moment, bring in the international community to help us rebuild Iraq, ask NATO to join us in the peacekeeping, complete our victory over the insurgents and terrorists that are fighting us and let the Iraqis govern themselves."

This would seem a bit internally inconsistent since the Democrats are calling for Iraq to be turned over to the "international community" and to "the Iraqi people." Which is it? It can't be both. This also conflicts with another standard Democratic criticism — that the administration is guilty of what Kerry has described as a "cut-and-run strategy." What is the Democrats' favored strategy of "internationalizing" Iraq if not another way for the U.S. to "cut and run"?

Logical inconsistencies aside, the Democratic rhetoric is attractive. Sure, it would be nice to dump Iraq's problems into someone else's lap. Why should we continue to lose our soldiers and spend our money? Let someone else bear the burden. It would also be nice to eat nothing but potato chips and candy bars and never get fat.

But is the Democratic plan a realistic option? Specifically, is there any reason to think that the "international community" — that wonderful abstraction — is ready and willing to assume responsibility for Iraq?

The answer is no. The United Nations pulled out almost all of its staff after its Baghdad headquarters was pulverized in a suicide bombing in August. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has not given any indication that he is rethinking that decision. It's a little difficult to run Iraq — or even to hold an international tribunal to try Saddam Hussein — if you're too scared to go there.

Well, what about NATO? Surely a few car bombings won't scare off the world's mightiest military alliance? On the surface this would seem to be a more plausible option. A number of NATO members, led by Britain, Poland and Spain, already have sizable troop contingents in Iraq, and NATO is already providing some planning capability to support this deployment. It would be great if NATO took a bigger role, but this line of thinking runs smack into the alliance's lack of deployable military assets.

Just look at Afghanistan, where NATO has already taken over responsibility for the 5,700-strong International Security Assistance Force and has pledged to extend its reach beyond Kabul. This month, the indefatigable NATO secretary-general, Lord George Robertson, begged his members to supply some helicopters to the peacekeepers, who have only three of their own.

According to the Wall Street Journal, the French defense minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, responded with a
sarcastic sneer: "I have a helicopter for you, Lord Robertson. I will send you a plastic model of one for Christmas."

If European states are reluctant to do more in Afghanistan — an intervention they all supported and one that has won the strongest possible United Nations support — what chance is there that they will do more in Iraq?

The reality is that we already have about all the foreign troops we're ever going to get in Iraq — about 24,000. It would be nice if we could get more money to support the rebuilding effort, or if other nations would at least forgive some of Iraq's $120 billion of debt. The Bush administration isn't helping its own cause here by refusing to hand out rebuilding contracts to nations that opposed the war. But it is not clear how more "internationalization" will make penny-pinching countries open up their treasuries. They already have the option of contributing to a World Bank trust fund, if they don't want to give money directly to the U.S. authorities.

When you look behind the Democrats' rhetoric, then, what you find is — more rhetoric. The Bush administration has made more than its share of mistakes in Iraq, but the Democratic candidates have no plausible alternative plan.