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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Basra and the Brits*August 14, 2008; Page A12*

A controversy has broken out in London over Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the honor of Britain's military, and Iraq. It's a reminder of the road America could have taken before the surge made victory possible -- and a warning to politicians who are slaves to public opinion in war.


The story starts with this spring's military offensive by the Iraqi government to oust the Shi'ite militias from the southern city of Basra. The British were given coalition control in the south starting in 2003. Yet when the Iraqi military ran into trouble at the start of their operation this year, the 4,100 Brits remained in their garrison at the airport outside the city. The Iraqis had to call in the Americans from the north for air cover and other support to help defeat radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. It was the first time the U.S. had deployed to the British-controlled region of Iraq in five years. The operation turned into a major success, with the Mahdi Army routed and the Iraq government in control.

But the British failure to act was an embarrassment, even a humiliation, and explanations have begun to emerge. All point to a failure of political leadership. It turns out that last September the British had struck a deal with Mr. Sadr, essentially ceding him control over Basra and releasing some 120 militia regulars from custody.

In exchange, the Mahdi Army let U.K. troops beat a retreat from their base inside Basra to the airport unmolested. The Times of London reports that under the deal no soldier could set foot back in the city without express permission from Defense Minister Des Browne. Reports from Iraq add that the British performance has led to significant cooling of relations between the U.S. and British military forces in Iraq.

The Brown government implicitly acknowledges the deal with Mr. Sadr -- albeit without apologizing to the people of Basra who were terrorized for half a year by the Mahdi Army. However, Whitehall rejects that any such "accommodation" prevented British participation in the first days of the battle of Basra. It says the Brits lacked the proper equipment to assist the Iraqis. Whether that's true or not, the messages that Mr. Brown had been sending from the day he became Prime Minister were clear enough. He wanted British soldiers far removed from any fighting, and the British officer corps heeded his wishes.

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In a sad irony, the British disgrace in Basra has become another blot against Mr. Brown's leadership at home. Mr. Brown was finally able to oust Tony Blair as Labour Party leader and Prime Minister in part because the British public was tired of Iraq and Mr. Brown promised a withdrawal. As America pushed ahead with the military surge in 2007, Britain went in the opposite direction. Last September, Mr. Brown ordered the British contingent in southern Iraq drawn down quickly. In the new Prime Minister's sights was victory in British elections, even if it meant a lack of victory in Iraq.

In other words, Mr. Brown chose to pursue precisely the path that most of the American political establishment urged on President Bush at the same time. Mr. Bush resisted the James Baker-Lee Hamilton Iraq Study Group path to retreat, and both Iraq and the American strategic position in the Middle East are far better for it. Mr. Brown took the path of least political resistance, yet now finds himself under criticism for having allowed the proud British military to fail in its duty. Barely 14 months in office, Mr. Brown is struggling to hold on as PM long enough to even contest the next election in 2010.

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