Letting terrorists off the hook

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Najaf was the most important test so far of the Bush Doctrine on terrorism, and we flunked it.

For weeks, Shiite warlord Muqtada al-Sadr held the combined forces of the United States and the new Iraqi government at bay by occupying the Shiites' holiest shrine, the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf. He held his own shrine hostage as he mounted a rebellion against the new Iraqi democracy, betting correctly that America would not risk the wrath of some 120 million Shiite Muslims by attacking the mosque to get him.

Even though Americans have been burned alive and hung beheaded from the bridges over the Euphrates River by Sadr's terrorists, we stepped aside last week after placing Sadr in a military stranglehold and let him go, in a gesture to the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's leading Shiite cleric.

Sistani had conveniently left his Najaf home just as hostilities erupted several weeks ago to undergo "medical treatment" in Lebanon and England. He returned Sept. 2 at the head of a convoy of tens of thousands of Shiite worshipers to "relieve" the siege of the Ali Mosque.

Thousands of pilgrims streamed into the shrine and mixed with the terrorists holed up inside. The multitude then filed out with Sadr's men defiantly chanting, as U.S. troops pulled back to leave the area protected by Iraqi police.

It is certainly praiseworthy when the top Shiite cleric brokers a deal to end a military confrontation that has destroyed much of Iraq's holy city, but there is something distasteful when the "surrender" of the Shiite warlord who began the confrontation in the first place meant only giving up control of the mosque. Sadr slipped off into the night, presumably to fight again.

Is this how to deal with a terrorist rebellion against a regime that 1,000 Americans have given their lives to establish? President George W. Bush's total war against terrorism is starting to look like a much more selective conflict: a little war here, a little amnesty for terrorists there.

The battle of Najaf shows how little we have progressed from Bush's declaration last year of "mission accomplished." If we are to help the Iraqis complete their transition to democracy – and avoid another Vietnam – we must scale back our occupation, but without bending the power of the world's greatest democracy to the fanatic whims of Shiite – or other – extremists. We must risk inflaming the
most extreme elements of the Shiite population in an effort to bring selfgovernment to the peaceful majority of their 120 million population.

How can America lead the world war against terrorism if it gives amnesty to a brutal warlord? Make no mistake: We’re no longer talking only about Shiites. Fundamentalist Sunni militias now control the crucial western approaches to Baghdad in two cities, Fallujah and Ramadi, with U.S. troops virtually confined to heavily defended forts on the desert’s edge.

Islamist fundamentalism is a fanatical perversion of Islam that is fueled by irrational hatred of Christians and Jews. The U.S. war against terrorism is in large part a war against the Islamist terrorists – 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi Arabian Wahhabi fanatics – who brought us the devastation of 9-11.

The Bush Doctrine was established in response to 9-11, which has left an everlasting impact on the city where the Republican Party convention met this month. That doctrine has just been successfully challenged by Muqtada al-Sadr, a terrorist who has murdered Americans and has been coordinating terrorist attacks for months against the coalition forces. He also shares the Islamist belief that Osama bin Laden defeated the evil Soviet Empire in Afghanistan, leaving only the Great Satan to eliminate.

Sistani’s return to Najaf sent the signal that only Islam can protect Iraq’s inhabitants. This is the top of a slippery slope down which the emerging Iraqi democracy could plunge and become another Iranian theocracy – unless America wakes up.

Sadr’s poorly trained fighters, armed with rocket-propelled grenades against 70-ton American tanks, F-16 jet fighters and Apache helicopter gunships, achieved a standoff that other Iraqi insurgents note well. The Associated Press quoted Secretary of State Colin Powell on Aug. 27 as claiming Sadr's forces "took huge losses" during three weeks of fighting, leaving his "Mahdi Army" greatly weakened, and crediting Iraq’s interim government for working with Sistani to resolve the crisis. But Powell also cautioned against future terrorist threats to upcoming elections in both Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the U.S., saying, "They can't be allowed to win and they will not win."

They cannot win, simply because all that these fanatic, Islamist forces have to offer people who have been delivered from dictatorship is destruction. In Najaf, it also meant the destruction of the first attempts by Iraqis to re-establish a tourism industry that had been banned by Saddam Hussein. As Reuters quoted a Najaf hotel employee on Aug. 28:
"The only thing the fighting accomplished was the destruction of Najaf. Look at our hotel. We were just making progress building it," said Rafaat Maher, looking down from a balcony scarred by bullets on a makeshift roadside graveyard for victims of the fighting. "They are not rebuilding Iraq. They are destroying it," he said. "I must have seen 100 people buried right there in front of the hotel."