

Former Top General in Iraq Faults Bush Administration

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 12— In a sweeping indictment of the four-year effort in Iraq, the former top American commander called the Bush administration's handling of the war incompetent and warned that the United States was "living a nightmare with no end in sight."



Gen. Ricardo Sanchez

In one of his first major public speeches since leaving the Army in late 2006, retired Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez blamed the administration for a "catastrophically flawed, unrealistically optimistic war plan" and denounced the current "surge" strategy as a "desperate" move that will not achieve long-term stability.

"After more than four years of fighting, America continues its desperate struggle in Iraq without any concerted effort to devise a strategy that will achieve victory in that war-torn country or in the greater conflict against extremism," Mr. Sanchez said, at a gathering here of military reporters and editors.

General Sanchez is the most senior in a string of retired generals to harshly criticize the administration's conduct of the war. Asked following his remarks why he waited nearly a year after his retirement to outline his views, he responded that that it was not the place of active duty officers to challenge lawful orders from civilian authorities. General Sanchez, who is said to be considering a book, promised further public statements criticizing officials by name.

"There was been a glaring and unfortunate display of incompetent strategic leadership within our national leaders," he said, adding later in his remarks that civilian officials have been "derelict in their duties" and guilty of a "lust for power."

The White House had no initial comment.

But his role as commander in Iraq during the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal leaves General Sanchez vulnerable to criticism that that he is shifting the blame from himself and exacting revenge against an administration that replaced him as the top commander in the aftermath of the scandal

and declined to nominate him for a fourth star, forcing his retirement.

Though he was cleared of wrongdoing in the abuse matter by an Army investigation, he nonetheless became a symbol, along with officials like L. Paul Bremer III, the chief administrator in Iraq, of the ineffective American leadership early in the occupation.

Questioned by reporters after his speech, he included the military and himself among those who made mistakes in Iraq, citing the failure to insist on a better post-invasion stabilization plan.

But his main criticism was leveled at the Bush administration, which he said he said has failed to mobilize the entire United States government, other than the military, to contribute meaningfully to reconstructing and stabilizing Iraq.

"National leadership continues to believe that victory can be achieved by military power alone," he said. "Continued manipulations and adjustments to our military strategy will not achieve victory. The best we can do with this flawed approach is stave off defeat."

Asked after his remarks what strategy he favored, General Sanchez ticked off a series of steps — from promoting reconciliation among Iraq's warring sectarian factions to building effective Iraqi army and police units — that closely paralleled the list of tasks frequently cited by the Bush administration.

But he said that the administration had failed to craft a detailed strategy for achieving those steps that went beyond the use of military force.

"The administration, Congress and the entire inter-agency, especially the State Department, must shoulder responsibility for the catastrophic failure, and the American people must hold them accountable," General Sanchez said.

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