More than a year later, as Iraq prepares to assume power, serious security and diplomatic hurdles remain for that country, as well as for the United States and its coalition partners.

Joining us now to talk about the challenges ahead, two special guests, the former United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. He served in the Nixon and Ford administrations. And Zbigniew Brzezinski, who served as the national security advisor under former President Jimmy Carter.

Gentlemen, welcome back to LATE EDITION.

And I'll begin, Dr. Kissinger, with you. Is this handover of sovereignty, of power in Iraq going to work? HENRY KISSINGER, FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE: The handover of power is going to be a major test of about what has been accomplished. (UNINTELLIGIBLE) or not, it had to be turned over at some point, and I think the turnover will crystallize the issues that have to be resolved.

BLITZER: Well, give us your assessment. What do you think? Is it going to work?

KISSINGER: There are three -- I don't know, to be quite frank.

There are three issues that need to be solved. One is the security issue and how that is conducted under conditions of sovereignty.

The second is the sort of governmental structure that will emerge, how much centralization and how much local autonomy.

And the third is the international status of that new regime and of the relationship between the United States and that new regime on the international pages (ph).

I think we have an opportunity to deal with all of these problems. We must deal with all these problems, because the consequences of failure would be very serious, not only for us, but for our allies and for our countries that have significant Muslim populations.

BLITZER: Dr. Brzezinski, what's your assessment?

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI, FORMER NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER: I think the longer we stay, the greater the difficulties of transition. Because the fact is -- and we have a lot of evidence for that -- most Iraqis, overwhelmingly now, resent, hate the occupation.

BLITZER: Hate?

BRZEZINSKI: Hate the occupation. Resent it and hate it. We have lots of polls on this, taken by the Coalition Provisional Authority.

So any interim government that's being put in place by us, by default, is going to become the object also of the Iraqi animous, the longer we stay.
How long can we stay? That depends very much on whether we simply wait and see that the situation has become stable and secure, which could be a very long time indeed, as Israelis have learned in the West Bank, where they have been now for 37 years. Or we can decide that at some point, we're going to set the date, make it clear we're leaving, thereby, in my view, give more impetus to the Iraqis to shape up and take charge.

BLITZER: What kind of a time frame for a deadline are you suggesting? BRZEZINSKI: Obviously, it shouldn't be a deadline which forces us to leave rapidly, in a pell-mell fashion. But it shouldn't be so far away that the Iraqis become convinced that we mean to stay indefinitely.

So I would say sometime next year, sometime next year, maybe as early as April, which will have been two years since the occupation, maybe toward the end of the year. Because that would give the Iraqi government the stimulus it needs to get hold before the whole thing becomes explosive.

BLITZER: Dr. Kissinger, we heard Senator Hagel say on this program earlier that top U.S. generals have briefed him and other members of the Foreign Relations Committee to the point that they are preparing for about 140,000 U.S. troops through 2006, maybe even through 2007. What do you say to Dr. Brzezinski's proposal for a time line to get out?

KISSINGER: Dr. Brzezinski and I have been on programs for 30 years, but I've never disagreed with him as much as this. We cannot possibly set a date for next April under present conditions, unless we're looking for an alibi to leave.

There's no possible way we can ask an Iraqi government to train the forces and to withstand the pressures from the internal insurrection and from the outside forces from Iran and Syria and others that will be involved. And I think such a complete collapse of the American position would have disastrous consequences for us on a global basis.

We shouldn't stay indefinitely. But I do not think we can aid this process by setting a deadline now. We have to get this president an opportunity to develop.

BLITZER: Let me let Dr. Brzezinski respond.

BRZEZINSKI: Well, I think what Henry is saying is, in effect, that we'll stay indefinitely. He has already raised the issue of Syria and Iran. Does he think that Iran and Syria are going to disappear? They're going to be there. They're going to be there. And one way or another, they're going to be involved.

If we're going to stay there until such time as the Syrians and the Iranians are no longer engaged, we're going to be there indefinitely. And I don't think staying indefinitely in Iraq is in our interest, because the issue's not just Iraq.

What we have to recognize and face is the fact that our involvement in Iraq is becoming
now a catalyst for unrest throughout the Middle East. And it's destabilizing Saudi Arabia; it's galvanizing Arab passions against the United States. It's beginning to be viewed as the other side of a single coin, namely, it's being viewed as linked to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. And we're going to be bogged down for years and years and years to come.

BLITZER: Dr. Kissinger, go ahead and respond. KISSINGER: Certainly Iran and Syria are going to be there, but the conditions in which their relationship to Iraq will take place will depend importantly on the role that they think that not only the United States but other countries may play in Iraq.

It is a phony argument to say we either stay indefinitely or we get out next April. We should proceed on trying to build a government in Iraq. We should try to maintain the security situation, to the best of our ability. And in that process, we can also then deal with relationships with Syria and Iran.

But for the United States to withdraw from Iraq, saying that we cannot cope with Iran and Syria, and that the United States leaves everything that has been done in what is in effect a pell-mell fashion, I think would be a disaster.

BLITZER: All right. I'm going to ask both of you to hold your thoughts for a moment. We're going to take a quick commercial break.

Lots more to talk about with the former secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, the former national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski. They'll also be taking your phone calls.

You're watching "LATE EDITION," the last word in Sunday talk.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

BLITZER: Welcome back. We're continuing our conversation with the former U.S. secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, and the former U.S. national security advisor, Zbigniew Bzrezinski.

Dr. Brzezinski, I wanted to give you a chance to respond to Dr. Kissinger saying if your proposal to just pull out by next April goes into effect, it could be a disaster for the U.S. throughout the region.

BZREZINSKI: Well, Henry has said more than that. My good old friend said it was a phony argument. And I want to return the compliment by suggesting that his argument is very reminiscent of what he used to say during the Vietnamese war, when he was arguing that we should stay until we see light at the end of the tunnel.

The point is, the longer we stay and the more indefinite our stay is because we don't define how long we're staying, the more there will be opposition and the more Iraqi politicians will begin to compete in demanding that we leave. So we, in effect, lose
control over our policy.

BLITZER: Well, that's a serious charge you're making against Dr. Kissinger. Let me let him respond.

Is this the same argument you're making today, Dr. Kissinger, that you made during the Vietnam War, that if the U.S. simply pulled out, it would be a disaster?

KISSINGER: I never used the argument "a light at the end of the tunnel." I said, indeed, during the Vietnam War that we could not simply abandon people to which four American administrations of both parties had pledged support. And I believed then that we owed it to the people of Vietnam that we would leave under conditions in which they were given an opportunity to determine their own fate.

As it happened that once an agreement was made, the domestic conditions in the United States and Watergate made it impossible to implement the premises of the agreement. So we don't know how it would have worked out.

But I repeat, of course we should leave at some point. I object to a deadline that is set closed and indeed to any specific deadline. I think we should state certain criteria that we want to meet in the process of building security and in other matters. But I do not think that setting a fixed deadline can possibly lead to anything except people waiting us out.

BLITZER: Dr. Bzrezinski, the former vice president of the United States, Al Gore, delivered another speech here in Washington at Georgetown University, the law school, there earlier in the week, basically saying the president lied to the American people about this war, and it's been a disaster ever since. I wanted you to listen to this little lecture from what Gore said.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GORE: If Iraq had nothing to do with the attack or the organization that launched the attack against us, then that means the president took us to war when he didn't have to, a war in which almost 900 of our soldiers have been killed and almost 5,000 have been wounded.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: Was this war, Dr. Bzrezinski, a mistake?

BZREZINSKI: The fact that Hussein is gone is a good thing. But the costs of getting him out have been too high and are rising.

And this is what concerns me about the longer run, namely that the war in Iraq is actually intensifying hatred against us in the Islamic world as a whole, and specifically in the Middle East. It is galvanizing greater unity among a variety of terrorist groups. And it is
making it more difficult to sustain our position in the Middle East.

Look, Saudi Arabia may blow up at any point. Americans are being told officially by the State Department to be leaving Saudi Arabia, which means, in effect, we're giving advice to Americans that the terrorists themselves favor, namely, "Americans, get out."

Our position in the region is deteriorating. And we need a much broader strategy than just saying we're going to stay in Iraq indefinitely until we feel the place is secure. We have to address other issues as well.

BLITZER: Let me let Dr. Kissinger weigh in on this specific point.

Was the war, Dr. Kissinger, a mistake?

KISSINGER: I think the war was made on the basis of reasonable judgments in the light of analysis and intelligence information that then existed.

The terrorism in Saudi Arabia is surely not caused by events in Iraq. And the challenge that we are facing from terrorism we would face in any event.

Certainly, there were mistakes of analysis made and that the expectation of how to govern Iraq after victory was too optimistic. But there's no point in going over that particular argument. And I think it's painful to hear a former vice president make the sort of charges that you made.

The question is how we can best improve the situation from where we are. And the challenge of terrorism is what brought us into the region, and it was certainly not caused by our resistance to it.

BLITZER: All right, Dr. Kissinger, Dr. Bzrezinski, unfortunately we have to leave it right there. Thanks for a serious, thoughtful discussion.

BZREZINSKI: Thank you very much.

BLITZER: Up next, the results of our Web poll question of the week on who should have legal custody of Saddam Hussein after this week's handover of power in Iraq? We'll give you the results when we come back.