Criticisms Mounts of U.S. Generals in Iraq

Top warmakers like Gen. John Abizaid have thus far escaped blame for the failures in Iraq. But that's starting to change.

By SALLY B. DONNELLY

The Bush administration's recent shift in strategy on the Iraq War — ending talk about "staying the course" and replacing it with a new emphasis on flexibility in response to changing conditions on the ground — may be a smart political tactic. But the implication of Bush's newfound candor, and his insistence that his decisions are being directed by advice from his generals on the ground, raises an unspoken question. If the generals are running the war and it is going so badly, shouldn't they share some of the blame?

Gen. Tommy Franks, who led the successful Iraq invasion in 2003, has come in for his share of criticism, for failing to plan sufficiently for the postwar phase. But the generals who replaced Franks in the summer of 2003 have largely escaped criticism. That, however, is starting to change. Chief among the targets is Gen. John Abizaid, who succeeded Franks as head of Central Command, the military region that covers most of the Middle East and includes Afghanistan and Iraq.

Senior and mid-level officers — all of whom either fought in Iraq or were involved in operations there, and none of whom were willing to be identified by name — are beginning to assert privately that Abizaid and other top generals must inevitably share responsibility for the setbacks in Iraq. Many of those officers have lost men on the battlefield in Iraq and saw their requests for more troops go unheeded. Others worked in positions where they saw the planning for Iraq or the execution of the war go wrong. "Iraq will go down as the greatest military and strategic blunder since Vietnam," says a former officer who dealt with Iraq planning. "And no one has ever been held accountable — including senior military leaders."

In a culture that values accountability and leadership, the military has been slow to look inward on Iraq. The fact that no senior officer has admitted to any serious