

# A New Path for America's Iraq Policy

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President Bush's misadventure in Iraq may be the worst foreign policy disaster the United States has ever been involved in. It is good that Saddam Hussein is out of power, but it has come at an incredibly high price. More than 3000 of America's soldiers have been killed and thousands more have been wounded, many very seriously. And hundreds of billions of tax dollars have been spent, and in some cases wasted, in Iraq. This has occurred because of the errors in judgment, tactical mistakes, and other major missteps by the Bush Administration that have plagued this endeavor since the brave men and women in our military ended the tyrannical reign of Saddam Hussein.

In addition to the high cost in lives and dollars that we have suffered, the reasons for going to war in Iraq in the first place have proven faulty. Furthermore, as the recent report from the Iraq Study Group (ISG) states, the situation in Iraq is "grave and deteriorating," with violence among sectarian groups increasing. Threats to security come from many sources, including the Sunni Arab insurgency, Shiite militias, and al Qaeda, not to mention widespread organized crime. Millions of Iraqis have either fled Iraq or are displaced within their country. Given all of this discouraging information, we need to ask - Why are our soldiers still in Iraq and why should they not come home immediately?

Unfortunately, it is not possible to turn back the clock four years and start again. The United States and the rest of the world, not to mention the Iraqi people, have to construct a policy that deals with the current conditions that have created new threats. If Iraq did not occupy such a critical place in the world, it might be the best policy for America to simply pull our troops out as soon as safely possible and leave the Iraqi people to work out a solution. But, Iraq is in one of the most important locations in the world, and although the situation in Iraq is dire, it could get much worse.

First, Iraq sits on the world's second largest oil reserves. While I have been working hard to bring about an energy policy that will wean America and the world off our dependence on this fossil fuel, it will continue to be an extremely valuable commodity for whoever controls it. That is why we must ensure that Iraq's oil does not fall into the hands of radical groups. Oil revenue could be used to fund the spread of radical Islamist revolution to other countries as well as threaten the rest of the world with terrorist attacks. The United States abandoned Afghanistan after the Cold War ended and that country became a haven for terrorists who planned the 9-11 attacks. Iraq would likely become an even worse terrorist training ground.

Second, Iraq is wedged between two countries that have shown themselves to be belligerent, Syria and Iran. Iran is working on building a nuclear weapons capability and has threatened to destroy the state of Israel. Syria has continuously meddled in the affairs of Lebanon and provides ongoing support to terrorists in Palestine. Both of these countries have been active in supporting groups in Iraq who are wreaking havoc and both seek to increase their power by exploiting the situation in Iraq. Leaving Iraq immediately would only embolden these regimes and allow them greater influence throughout the Middle East. Consequently, a stable Iraq is necessary to limit the power of these two dangerous countries.

Third, an immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops would create regional instability that could result in a large-scale war. If

Iraq falls into complete chaos, Iran and Syria will likely get more directly involved in the fighting. In addition, Saudi Arabia has said that they may intervene militarily in Iraq if they believe it is necessary to stop a widespread slaughter of Iraqi Sunnis. If chaos in Iraq propels Iraqi Kurds to attempt to break away and form their own country in the north of Iraq, Turkey may feel the need to intervene so as to quell any nationalist uprising of Kurds within their own borders. And these are only a few of the likely scenarios for a larger conflict. Clearly, the prospect of a multi-nation war is even less appealing than the current situation, and the United States must act to try to head-off conditions that may lead to such a catastrophe.

As long as there is still hope that we can serve a positive role in Iraq, the U.S. must not abandon Iraq and leave the situation to deteriorate. However, a new strategy in Iraq is needed now. This new Iraq policy must be based on the understanding that the keys to a solution in Iraq are political and social. Although it is important to recognize that an enforcement capability is necessary for security at any given place and time, peace and stability in Iraq cannot be won and maintained simply through military force. Therefore, the United States should implement a new Iraq policy based on three important components:

- (1) Bring the world community together to seek solutions in Iraq, including calling an international conference that will work on putting together a peacekeeping force and setting up an international reconstruction program.
- (2) Encourage achievement of important goals in national reconciliation, security, and governance by arranging a peace conference for Iraq's ethnic and religious factions, similar to the conference that led to the Dayton Accords.
- (3) Require the Administration to give Congress detailed reports on the situation in Iraq so that informed decisions can be made regarding funding Iraq's reconstruction and deciding when American forces can be redeployed.

First, the United States must bring the world community together to seek solutions in Iraq. Iraq's oil reserves, strategic location in the Middle East, and its potential to become a failed-state breeding ground for international terrorism dictate that the entire international community has an interest in Iraq's success. The Administration and the State Department must make more of an effort to utilize America's considerable diplomatic resources in order to rally international involvement in Iraq.

In rallying support, the U.S. should start by talking to all of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran and Syria. Iraq's sectarian violence, while rooted in centuries old conflicts, is being at least partially fueled by Iran and Syria. Consequently, the United States must be willing to work with Iran and Syria as well as all other nations in the region and around the world. But talking does not mean ceding to all requests that these countries make. Iran must not become a nuclear power and Syria must not once again move into Lebanon. But the United States should be willing to engage with these and other nations if we are to move forward with international cooperation on Iraq.

As part of bringing the world community together, the U.S. should call an international conference on Iraq. This conference will work on putting together an international peacekeeping force that will replace American and other troops that are currently in Iraq. A second purpose of this conference will be to put together an international reconstruction plan for Iraq. Iraq still suffers from critical shortages in electricity and drinking water, while infrastructure such as oil wells and roads remain in a state of disrepair. Many Iraqis remain unemployed and impoverished, making them easy recruits for sectarian militias and terrorist groups. While Congress must be given more complete information and oversight over U.S. reconstruction aid being sent to Iraq so that American money can be spent more effectively, the international community must also be called upon to provide other aid and plans for Iraq's rebuilding.

Second, the United States should join with other nations to arrange a peace conference - akin to the meetings that led to the Dayton Accords - that will bring together Iraqi leaders to achieve important goals in national reconciliation, security,

and governance. Broad-based pressure from a variety of international sources can make a difference in situations like Iraq's, as evidenced by the 1995 Dayton Accords that ended the war in Bosnia. Much like the current conflict in Iraq, the war in Bosnia was fueled by ethnic and religious divisions. However, after intense pressure from the international community, the warring parties came to the negotiating table in Dayton, Ohio and an agreement was reached. With similar international pressure applied to Iraqi leaders, and promises of international peacekeeping forces and increased reconstruction aid, it is my hope that Iraq's warring factions would peacefully come to the negotiating table. Peace discussions could take place in a country seen as a more neutral arbitrator than the U.S, such as El Salvador, which has proven its commitment to Iraqi stability by providing over 300 soldiers for peacekeeping operations. El Salvador would serve as a good location because it is physically far away from Iraq and provides an easily secured environment. In addition, El Salvador has special standing because it has had experience with its own civil war and subsequent aftermath.

Third, the Administration must be required to give Congress detailed reports on the situation in Iraq, especially in regard to security and progress on reconstruction. One of the reasons Iraq has reached this point is that the Republican Congress gave the Administration free rein on Iraq policy without asking questions. The Democratic Congress must, and will, act differently. The start will be bringing the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, military commanders, the members of the Iraq Study Group, and other leading experts on Iraq to testify before congressional committees. Also, we must require from the Administration a written, detailed report on the current security and reconstruction situation in Iraq with mandatory monthly follow-up reports.

Up to this point it appears that decisions regarding Iraq have been made based upon politics and not facts, political calculation instead of national interest. There is no place for partisan politics when it comes to the use of military force. The lives of our brave men and women should not be affected by political whims. That is why Congress must demand information from the Administration. When Congress is fully informed we will be able to make intelligent decisions, based on our national interest, about when U.S. forces can be redeployed from Iraq. I believe that with congressional oversight and greater international involvement, U.S. troops will be able to start redeployment from Iraq in 2007, with or without the President's leadership.

Clearly, America needs a new direction in Iraq. President Bush is scheduled to announce his new plan very soon. Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, nothing that this Administration has done has yet proven to be successful in Iraq. But I will wait to hear the President and I will listen to the congressional hearings before I make a final decision on his proposal. However, if President Bush were to follow the three-point proposal laid out here, we would truly be moving forward in a new direction that will help stabilize Iraq and bring our troops home soon.