

(September 10, 2007) Opening Statement on Iraq: The Path Ahead

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Iraq: The Path Ahead

Chicago Council on Global Affairs Middle East Forum Roundtable Discussion

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Good morning. I would like to thank everyone for being here, especially our three special guests, and thank the Chicago Council on Global Affairs for hosting this roundtable.

Since the war began in Iraq more than 3700 of our soldiers have been killed, over 27,000 thousand have been wounded - many very seriously-and hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent. In just the past two weeks I attended two wakes in my district for soldiers killed in Iraq. Our troops have done everything that we have asked them to do, and more. But this war has been a debacle. I strongly believe President Bush and his Administration have failed not only the American people, but especially the men and women we rely on to defend our nation. While we should not forget the past mistakes and how we got to this point, we must look forward. Today most Americans believe that we need a new policy for Iraq. But as many have said, right now there are no good choices. Still, leaders of this nation have a responsibility to choose and to act on the best path forward, not simply talk and posture.

Unfortunately, partisan politics has paralyzed American policy in Iraq. We must rise above the partisanship, bring Americans together, and find and implement a new plan. That is why we put this roundtable together, so that we could hear from experts and have a non-partisan discussion. We all want to bring our troops home. The speed at which we do this is probably the biggest point of contention. It is clear that in determining our policy, we need to consider the political and military situations in Iraq and the region, and America's military readiness, especially the state of our armed forces.

As we begin this roundtable I want to make clear where I am coming from. Earlier this year I voted for the resolution opposing the troop surge because, as I said then, the surge needed was a diplomatic surge. I introduced my own resolution that - among other things - called for convening a peace conference for Iraqis similar to the one that led to the Dayton Accords -- which Ambassador Gelbard did so much to make a reality, along with an international conference aimed at securing more multinational cooperation for stabilizing Iraq. I voted for the first Iraq supplemental, which was vetoed, because I believed we needed to put more pressure on President Bush to change his Iraq policy and more pressure on the Iraqi government to achieve internal reconciliation and take responsibility for their country.

But, what I also recognized back then was that without a bipartisan agreement on a new direction in Iraq we would end up maintaining the status quo policy. Unfortunately, this has been proven true over the past 6 months.

Consequently, in May I began working with Democrat Mark Udall, and Republicans Mike McCaul and Frank Wolf to develop bipartisan legislation to break the gridlock and change America's Iraq policy. In early June, we introduced a bill to implement the bipartisan recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, also known as the Baker-Hamilton Commission. As you know, key recommendations were (1) a diplomatic surge, (2) deadlines for Iraqis to implement reconciliation measures with consequences for failure, (3) transitioning American troops off of the front lines of the war and into training of Iraqis and special operations against international terrorists, and (4) setting a goal for troop redeployment. We quickly gathered 60 cosponsors for this bill including 35 Republicans. The same bill was introduced in a bipartisan fashion in the Senate. This was the first and so far the only piece of legislation changing America's Iraq policy that has received strong bipartisan support. I am, however, open to other ideas, and last night read with great interest a summary of recommendations in the USIPeace Briefing. I look forward to hearing from Paul Hughes, a member of the group which put this briefing together.

In recent days, we have seen increased efforts to find a bipartisan solution. I am very pleased that Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Reid said last week that they are looking to move bipartisan legislation. I am hopeful that these efforts continue as we reach a critical point in the debate this month. We cannot afford to allow the status quo to continue.

Last week Congress and the American people heard various reports on the situation in Iraq, and this week we'll hear from General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker. I look forward to hearing today from our panelists and everyone here, and engaging in a real discussion about the best way forward in Iraq.