

Withdrawal Wins New Political Support

By Erik Leaver | August 9, 2006

Over the past three and a half years, few members of Congress have challenged President George W. Bush over his “stay the course” mentality in Iraq. Indeed, just over a month ago nearly 300 Representatives endorsed the Bush Iraq policy of remaining in Iraq until a “free and stable Iraq” has been achieved. And while 39 Senators voted to support withdrawal in the same month, only 13 brave Senators supported a deadline of 2007.

But with dire assessments about a growing civil war from top U.S. brass, the highest death tolls in Iraq since Saddam fell, and Bush’s announcement to send 5,000 more troops to Iraq, new voices are sounding the call for a phased withdrawal from Iraq.

Writing to Bush on July 31st, twelve Senate and House Democratic Leaders and ranking members from the key national security committees wrote to the President, “We believe that a phased redeployment of U.S. forces from Iraq should begin before the end of 2006.” Many of the twelve are newcomers to the withdrawal position including Tom Lantos, Jane Harman, and Jay Rockefeller.

With political heavyweights such as Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid and House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer signing on, conservative pundits were quick to call the letter a political ploy during an election year. More likely these leaders have finally taken a reality check of the situation. The U.S. (and Iraqi) public is solidly behind a timetable for withdrawal and the situation in Iraq getting worse by the day with no clear military mission for the U.S. remaining. These members of Congress seem to have looked honestly at the situation and are proposing the politically difficult but necessary solution.

Iraq slides closer to all-out civil war every day. Newspapers just reported that a senior British diplomat in Baghdad told Prime Minister Tony

Blair that “the prospect of a low intensity civil war and a de facto division of Iraq is probably more likely at this stage than a successful and substantial transition to a stable democracy.” The death toll supports this grim analysis, last month, the UN reported that Iraq lost 3,149 lives in June alone, a 30% increase from last year’s average.

Signs of further decay abound as many of the Shi’ite religious leaders who initially supported the Iraqi government are now crying out against it. A split within the Shi’ites represents the newest threat to the stability of the government. Demonstrations called by Shi’ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr have brought hundreds of thousands to protest Israel’s attacks against Hezbollah in recent days but they also serve the purpose of underlining the strength he carries of his supporters. If fighting develops between the Shi’ites the situation will reach epic proportions.

Furthermore, the spike in violence and deaths is happening despite Bush’s plan to stand up Iraqis so the U.S. can stand down. While the number of trained Iraqi soldiers and police grew from 168,670 in June 2005 to some 264,600 a year later, the number of attacks against the United States has actually increased. This record directly contradicts the statement House Majority Leader John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) issued last week titled, “Progress in Iraq . . . Despite Domsday Democrats.”



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The situation at home also is giving lawmakers a reason to reassess the Iraq War. Last week, U.S. army officials reported that the war has led to a sharp decline in readiness. Two-thirds of the Army Reserves have been declared unfit for combat with similar levels for the regular Army reported. And while Senators tried to outflank each other by seeing who could put more money on the table to address these deficits in order to be labeled as the party who best supports the troops, military officials estimate they need at least \$40 billion more to complete the job.

Policymakers are now seeing more clearly the effects of the war at home. For example, Alabama's Army National Guard now has the largest presence in Iraq since 2003. Many of its members are serving their second and third tours. The costs of these extensive deployments are clear as every state in the Union has suffered casualties. While President Bush hasn't attended one single funeral for a fallen soldier, most members of Congress have.

With votes on the line for the 2006 mid-term elections, policymakers now need to listen to voters more closely. For decades issues of foreign policy have not weighed heavily on voters minds. But as

President Bush's war is causing a deep impact in lives, dollars, and in our national prestige, the Iraq War is rightly so an election issue. In Connecticut, the Democratic primary in which anti-war challenger Ned Lamont beat Joe Lieberman highlighted the war, but in seven other Senate races there is a clear-cut contest between an Iraq war supporter and a war opponent.

With the newfound spirit embodied in the letter from the twelve Senators, lawmakers are signaling they are no longer willing to leave the question to the next president as Bush promised in a speech this spring. Instead they are plotting the only sensible course left: the phased redeployment of U.S. forces before the end of the year, to transform the U.S. mission, and to launch a real diplomatic and reconstruction effort to help stabilize Iraq.

That policy might be supported by politics. But it's also the right solution. With hundreds of Iraqis and three U.S. soldiers dying every day, it's none too soon.

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