

News From _____

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Chairman Byrd Speaks on Iraq, President's Expected War Funding Request

Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, delivered remarks today on the conflict in Iraq and the President's upcoming war funding supplemental request. In a speech on the Senate floor, Senator Byrd clearly stated that he will support no more blank checks for the President's failed policy in Iraq.

Excerpt:

"In the fifth year of this misguided war, I am convinced that the best way to support our troops is to bring them home, and the only way to get them home may be to somehow restrict the funds for this disastrous war. We have tried this before and the President, the President, vetoed the bill. I am here today to insist that we must try again. Strings must be attached to this money. This Senator will support no more blank checks for Iraq."

Senator Byrd's full remarks are below.

Mr. President, a few days ago, Congress and the American public were treated to a sales job on Iraq that would have made any used car salesman proud. We heard the half-truths and rosy visions put forth by authoritative diplomats in dark suits and ribboned and starred generals in uniform, topped off by the pomp and circumstance of a well-rehearsed Oval Office speech. Visions were painted for us of a peaceful and prosperous oasis of democracy and stability in the turbulent geography of the Middle East, if only -- and only if -- our gallant soldiers stayed for just a little while longer to bring the dream to reality. Such a grand vision, of course, produced yet another new Bush Administration slogan, "Return upon success," which fits very nicely on a bumper sticker for the back of the lemon this team of salesmen is trying to peddle.

Like any good used car salesman, the President insists that we take him up on his once-in-a-lifetime good deal. Just as he has insisted, each and every time, that he needs a little more time for his war in Iraq. If we don't buy in once again, Iraq will descend into chaos, militias will commence with ethnic cleansing, terrorists will set up complexes from

which to launch attacks on the United States, and Iran or Syria, or both, will develop nuclear weapons and invade Iraq on their way to Israel.

Mr. President, I suggest that we stop and take a little time to consider this offer, consider what was said and what was not said. It is time to lift the hood and kick the tires.

President Bush said in his speech that things were going so well in Iraq that the extra troops needed for the surge could begin returning home . . . as long as conditions continued to improve. In the only timeline that he laid out, the President suggested that, subject to his fine print, the number of U.S. troops in Iraq might be reduced to 137,000 by July 2008. While that is certainly welcome news, it carefully neglects to mention that this reduction would still leave 7,000 more troops in Iraq than were present before the so-called "temporary surge" began in February 2007. Frankly, that is not much of a drawdown, given all the so-called "progress" in Iraq cited by the President.

The President said in 2003, "Mission accomplished." Now, he says that in December, it will be time to "transition to the next phase of our strategy in Iraq." He said, and I quote, "As terrorists are defeated, civil society takes root, and the Iraqis assume more control over their own security, our mission in Iraq will evolve. Over time, our troops will shift from leading operations, to partnering with Iraqi forces, and eventually to overwatching those forces."

Mr. President, in 2003, over four years ago, when U.S. forces overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein, there was supposed to be a rapid transition to a new civil government in Iraq. In all the years since the invasion, civil society has not yet put down strong roots despite our efforts. By every assessment and every benchmark, it is not happening now, either. The Iraqi central government is nowhere near achieving reconciliation, and equitable arrangements for the sharing of oil revenue or holding elections are but dim and distant visions. Iraqis have not assumed control over their own security. Indeed, independent assessments of Iraq have suggested that Iraqi security forces are riddled with sectarian corruption and will not be capable of providing security for some time to come, if ever.

U.S. troops have been "partnering" with Iraqi troops for years now, and U.S. troops have been training, equipping and supporting Iraqi forces to the tune of billions of dollars. U.S. troops have been conducting counterterrorism operations, as the President also noted in his speech. So what, pray tell, is new or different about this strategy? I can see nothing by which to judge success so that our troops may "return upon success." It is just a nice paint job slathered across the same old junk car.

The warranties on this new speech and this new sales job expire as soon as the car is driven off the lot. The only timeline offered by President Bush or General Petraeus ran out of time after July 2008. The pretty six-colored chart that General Petraeus used to show the troop drawdown associated with the transition had no dates on it past July 2008, though it was pretty clear that U.S. troops would be in Iraq for a very long time to come. President Bush explicitly said that if he has his way, U.S. troops would be in Iraq long past his exit from the White House. He boldly asserts that he will leave his staggering foreign policy calamity for someone else to clean up. Talk about passing the buck!

Mr. President, we simply cannot afford another slick White House sales job. Too many young men and women have died or have been maimed in this horrific war. We owe it to them to take a good hard look at the facts. General Petraeus, in his testimony, suggested that because of the "surge," the number of Iraqi deaths have decreased, indicating "progress." That may or may not be true . . . I do not know -- but I do know that

General Petraeus carefully did not note that the number of U.S. deaths in Iraq actually increased during the surge period, compared to the same periods in prior years. General Petraeus also did not note that the U.S. military death rate in Iraq, that is, the average number of deaths per month, also continues to climb from prior years.

General Petraeus pointed to the decrease in the number of Improvised Explosive Device, or IED, attacks during the surge period of June through August as another sign of progress. It is true that the number of attacks dropped . as it does every year during the very hottest months of June, July, and August. But what General Petraeus did not say is that the number of U.S. deaths from IEDs increased during the surge period, compared to the same period in prior years.

That, as they say, is the rest of the story. That is the whole truth, not carefully cherry-picked statistics designed to bolster the President's pitch for progress.

The President and his men also did not talk about the price tag of this shiny little war sedan. No need to discuss that before they have hooked us into writing the check. But the cost of this war should be uppermost in our minds, as the Senate addresses the defense authorization bill, and certainly before the Senate considers yet another war funding supplemental appropriations bill – the largest one ever.

Congress has already appropriated over \$450 billion for the war in Iraq, and if Congress approves the President's latest request for supplemental funds, that figure will grow to over \$600 billion during Fiscal Year 2008. That is a price tag with nine zeroes in it, folks. These direct costs do not cover the many hidden, indirect costs of this war, such as higher Veterans Administration costs, more veterans' disability payments, the considerable interest on the additional debt, higher oil and gasoline prices, increased security costs here at home, and the incalculable damage done to our image and reputation in the world because of this war. The combined direct and indirect costs and obligations of this war will exceed \$1 trillion by the most conservative estimates. Many economists believe that the costs are much higher.

That \$600 billion or \$1 trillion price tag also does not begin to cover the lost opportunity costs . all the ways in which money now spent on Iraq could have been used to make our bridges safer, secure our border, improve education, or to prepare for and rebuild after natural disasters and weather related farming failures. That money could have been used to develop safe, clean, alternative energy sources so that the United States would not have to rely so much on oil from the Middle East or other volatile regions of the world.

Nor does that \$600 billion or \$1 trillion cover the costs of keeping upwards of 130,000 troops in Iraq for the many additional years the President and his men suggest will be necessary to achieve their vision of progress and success. It boggles the mind to consider the long-term costs of buying this war.

We all say that we support the troops. These brave men and women have been given a near impossible task, which they have performed with dedication, professionalism, courage, and honor. The Congress has provided everything the generals have asked for, and more. The President has taken that support for our men and women in uniform to imply support and even validation of his policy. He wants to keep the U.S. military tied down in Iraq indefinitely, trying to bargain for a little more time, time and time again, never grasping that his policy is fatally flawed. History shows the fallacy of thinking that democracy can be force-fed at the point of a gun.

In the fifth year of this misguided war, I am convinced that the best way to support our troops is to bring them home, and the only way to get them home may be to somehow restrict the funds for this disastrous war. We have tried this before and the President, the President, vetoed the bill. I am here today to insist that we must try again. Strings must be attached to this money. This Senator will support no more blank checks for Iraq.

Mr. President, on October 11, 2002, I was one of only 23 Senators who voted against the authorization that led to this war. I call on my colleagues, for the sake of our soldiers and for the sake of our nation, to remember that half-truths and misleading claims are what led to this war. We can all recall that on February 5, 2003, the President sent Colin Powell, both a ribboned and starred general and a respected diplomat, to the United Nations to sell this war to the UN and to the nation. Secretary Powell painted frightening visions of anthrax, truck and rail car-mounted mobile weapons laboratories, and nuclear weapons . none of it was accurate. The nation was led to believe that our troops would be greeted as liberators, and that oil money would pay for Iraq's reconstruction. Now, while the half-truths have changed, the strategy of misleading the nation remains the same.

Iraq may descend further into chaos if U.S. troops leave now, or it may descend into chaos whenever they leave. As long as the United States keeps the peace in Iraq, there is no incentive for Iraqis to maintain the peace on their own. After nearly five years of this war, more than 3,800 deaths, over 27,000 casualties, and no end in sight, we must change course. This war, this draining, desultory, dreadful occupation of Iraq must end.

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