

TRANSCRIPT:

Obama Remarks to Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing with General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker

September 11, 2007

OBAMA: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, gentlemen, for your testimony. Obviously, with seven minutes, it's a little frustrating, because we're dealing with an extraordinarily complex situation.

So I just want to stipulate a couple things. Number one, the performance of our troops has been outstanding. And we thank them for their service. They've done everything that's been asked of them throughout this process.

Number two, I think that both of you gentlemen are doing the absolute best that you can, given an extraordinarily difficult situation. And so I appreciate the work that both of you are doing. I would say that the mission that's been given to you is what's at issue here in the Senate.

The question is one of strategy, not tactics. And the difficulty we have, I think, is that, each time we've talked to you, questions have been posed to you about the broader strategy of our war in Iraq, you've punted a little bit because you've said, look, that's a little outside my bailiwick.

But as Senator Feingold pointed out, we don't have limitless resources. And we've got to make these decisions, at least, in the Senate, based on priorities and the costs, as well as benefits, to pursuing a particular strategy.

I have to say, and this hasn't been commented on, I think that we should not have had this discussion on 9/11 or 9/10 or 9/12. Because I think it perpetuates this notion that, somehow, the original decision to go into Iraq was directly related to the attacks on 9/11.

And this is not to relitigate the original decision to go into Iraq.

It is to suggest that if the American people and the Congress had understood then that after devoting \$1 trillion, which is what this thing optimistically will end up having cost, thousands of American lives, the creation of an environment in which Al Qaeda in Iraq could

operate because it didn't exist prior to our invasion, that we have increased terrorist recruitment around the world, that Iran has been strengthened, that bin Laden and Al Qaeda are stronger than at any time since 2001, and that the process of Iraqi reconstruction and their standard of living would continue to be lower than it was pre-invasion, that if that had been the deal, I think most people would have said that's a bad deal, that does not make sense, that does not serve the United States' strategic interests.

And so I think that some of the frustration you hear from some of the questioners is that we have now set the bar so low that modest improvement in what was a completely chaotic situation, to the point where now we just have the levels of intolerable violence that existed in June of 2006 is considered success, and it's not.

This continues to be a disastrous foreign policy mistake. And we are now confronted with the question: How do we clean up the mess and make the best out of a situation in which there are no good options, there are bad options and worse options?

And this is not a criticism of either of you gentlemen, this is a criticism of this president and the administration which has set a mission for the military and for our diplomatic forces that is extraordinarily difficult now to achieve.

OBAMA: And there has been no acknowledgement of that on the part of this administration, so that we have the president in Australia suggesting somehow that we are, as was stated before, kicking A-S-S.

How can we have a president making that assessment? And it makes it very difficult then for those of us who would like to join with you in a bipartisan way to figure out how to best move forward to extricate this from the day-to-day politics that infects Washington. So I just wanted to get that on the record.

Final stipulation, I think the surge has had some impact, as I suggested. I would hope it would, given the sacrifices and loss that have been made. I would argue that the impact has been relatively modest given the investment.

And I have to say that, based on your testimony, it is not clear to me that the primary success that you've shown in Anbar has anything to do with the surge. You said, in this testimony, that it's political the reason for the success in Anbar, not because of an increase in troop strength.

We have, maybe, seen some modest decline in sectarian violence inside Baghdad as a consequence of our troop withdrawals. That has been purchased at the cost of increased U.S. casualties and is unsustainable. What we haven't seen is a significant disarming of the Shia militias. Again, during your testimony you've told us that essentially the Shias decided, even before we got there, to get on one knee and to wait it out.

We haven't seen, most importantly, any significant improvement, in terms of the central government's performance. It continues to be ineffectual and we have not seen national reconciliation of the sort that was promised prior to the surge.

So I just think it is important for us to get all that clear and on the record because that provides the context in which we are going to have to be making a series of decisions.

That, of course, now leaves me very little time to ask questions and that's unfortunate.

BIDEN: That's true, Senator.

(LAUGHTER)

OBAMA: Let me pick up on a question that, I think, was relevant and posed by Senator Murkowski. And that is, the general theory has been that we will draw down when Iraqi security forces stand up and or the Iraqi government stands up.

OBAMA: General Petraeus, in the counterinsurgency manual that you wrote, it says that even the strongest U.S. commitment will not succeed if the populous does not perceive the host nation government as having similar will and stamina to our own.

The question, I think, that everybody is asking is, how long will this take? And at what point do we say enough? General -- Ambassador Crocker, you said the patience -- the Iraqi people understand that the patience of the American people is not limitless. But that appears to be exactly what you're asking for in this testimony.

I don't see, at any point, where you say, if this fails, or if that does not work, or if we are not seeing these benchmarks met or any conditions in which we would make a decision now to start drawing down our troops. And you suggest, somehow, that our drawing down troops will not trigger a different set of behaviors on the part of the Iraqis, but I don't see what will.

And if we're there the same place a year from now, can you please describe for me any circumstances in which you would make a different recommendation and suggest it is now time for us to start withdrawing our troops? Any scenario? Any set of benchmarks that had not been met?

CROCKER: Senator, I described for Senator Sununu a little bit ago some of the things that I think are going to be very important as we move ahead.

OBAMA: Can you repeat those? And I know I'm out of time, so I'm just going to ask for both the general and the ambassador to answer.

BIDEN: We are -- let me just make it clear. We're not going to have much -- these guys have to testify at 2:00. It's in the record. But why won't you try to summarize, quickly, what you said? OK?

CROCKER: I mentioned several points. As General Petraeus has said, what is happening in Iraq is an ethno-sectarian competition for power and resources. It's -- that's simply the way it is.

So the question is, is it played out violently or in other ways.

So, I think one key indicator is going to be levels of violence going forward. They've come down substantially, they need to come down farther, and they need to stay down. So that is obviously something we are going to be looking for. As they go down and stay down, it's going to be very important to see the kinds of political responses that we saw for example in Anbar and are starting to see in Diyala and are starting to see in a few other places. The degree to which the issues do move to the political arena, and then related to that a third point is the linkages then that need to develop between the center and the provinces, the outlying areas, as security conditions stabilize, assuming they do.

And the final point coming back to your comment on militias, I think its going to be very important to see what happens in the months ahead with respect to the government's ability to take on militia elements in Baghdad and elsewhere.

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