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Status quo unacceptable

For the fight in Iraq to continue, this nation's leaders must be able to show tangible progress toward tangible goals.

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More elected officials are raising questions -- or at least repeating constituents' concerns -- about the seeming lack of progress with the Iraq war and American public's will to continue the fight. The assessments, which sound at times like exasperation, are fair, and the message is becoming clearer: The status quo is no longer acceptable in Iraq. Progress must be made.

Rep. Gresham Barrett, speaking last month to reporters and editors of The Greenville News, called the war "a black cloud" over the country. Sen. Jim DeMint, in a similar meeting, said Americans were "tired" of the war, though he said it is naive to think of the Iraq war as separate from the war on terror. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., told The News the nation's commitment to the Middle East may last 30 to 40 years. Rep. Bob Inglis, just back from Iraq, said he is impatient for progress and that "stay the course is not a good enough answer."

The comments reflect Americans' growing frustrations at the lack of visible progress. More than 2,600 Americans have died in Iraq, and although Saddam Hussein is no longer in power, an American general said Aug. 3 that Iraq is closer to civil war than ever before. That is not acceptable, particularly given President Bush's assurances last week that America's sacrifices will continue for the foreseeable future.

Americans supported this war when it began, but that support was not a mandate for perpetual war with little apparent success. The administration owes the American people progress in this fight, whether it be outright victory, a stable country or an Iraq that can defend itself.

Advertisement For too long, the debate over the war has been black and white: stay or go, "stay the course" or "cut and run." Cliches no longer are an effective way to summarize the options. At the same time, we must remember the current debate is not over the justification for war. That decision was made, and the United States committed to fighting and winning. But mistakes have been made, and little recent progress is evident.

Absent such evidence, it's time to consider whether other options exist. Would more forces help accomplish the job? Does the offensive strategy need to be changed? Is it even possible to unite Iraq?

As Inglis said, Americans can't simply accept the status quo. We can't leave our troops in harm's way while we execute an open-ended strategy of waiting for a viable government to form or for the Iraqi people to develop a will to work together.

The United States must actively shape that government and aggressively fight those who oppose that will. Most of all, this administration needs to help Americans see and understand the fruits of their sacrifices.
