

**Statement of The Honorable Francis J. West, former Assistant Secretary of Defense,
before the Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations
Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives
July 25, 2007**

Chairman Snyder, Ranking Member Akin and Members:

It is an honor to appear before this subcommittee. I have been to Iraq 13 times in the past four years, embedding with more than 50 Iraqi and American battalions. I know from firsthand experience that the men and women of our Armed Forces serving in Iraq and Afghanistan have benefited greatly from your untiring efforts on their behalf and from your unstinting determination to insure those on the front lines receive the equipment and services they so richly deserve.

The subject today is "Alternatives for Iraq". The President and the Congress agree about the desirability of a withdrawal of US forces; the issue is under what conditions. It makes a vast difference to our self-esteem as a nation, to our reputation around the world and to the morale of our enemies whether we say we are withdrawing because the Iraqi forces have improved or because we have given up.

That issue towers above any discussion of tactics, logistics diplomacy or even timing. The Iraqi Study Group and former Secretary of State Kissinger have suggested that negotiations might yield an honorable withdrawal - some sort of compromise that extracts American soldiers while not precipitating a collapse inside Iraq. But it's not clear what convergence of interests with Iran or Syria would persuade them to cease supporting insurgents. And inside Iraq, the Jesh al Mahdi extremists and al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) must be destroyed, not placated.

Separate from AQI, though, there are a dozen other Iraqi insurgent groups. At the local level, there have been productive negotiations with the tribes, undoubtedly including some of these insurgents. These bottom-up understandings, focused against AQI, occurred because military action changed the calculus of the tribes about who was going to win. Successful negotiations flowed from battlefield success, not the other way around.

In Anbar, our commander, Major General Walt Gaskin, believes we have turned the corner, with weekly incidents dropping from 428 in July of '06 to 98 in July of '07. In Baghdad and its outskirts, that's exactly what General Petraeus intends to do with his surge strategy - bring security to the local level and break the cycle of violence.

America is divided between two schools of thought about Iraq. The first school - let's call them the Anti-Terror Camp - identifies the jihadists as the main enemy. General Petraeus has said that "Iraq is the central front of al Qaeda's global campaign." AQI is "public enemy number one" because it slaughters thousands

of innocent Shiites in order to provoke a civil war. CIA Director Gen. Michael Hayden believes that a US failure in Iraq will result "in a safe haven (for al Qaeda) from which then to plan and conduct attacks against the West".

Although AQI is a minority insurgent faction, it is unmatched in savagery. I watched Fallujah descend into hell when the Marines pulled back in May of 2004. Our troops called it the "M & I" campaign: Murder and Intimidation on an astonishing scale. In this war, the moral is to the physical as 20 to one. Most of the Iraqi forces and the tribes don't have yet the self-confidence and experience to stand alone against those killers.

Al Qaeda, however, is losing heavily in Anbar, is on the defense in Baghdad and is fleeing north toward Baqubah. The Anti-Terror Camp believes that fracturing AQI and the Jesh al Mahdi death squads will set the conditions that enable US withdrawal, leaving Iraqi forces to enforce reasonable stability, albeit with continued violence. Based on my observations in a half dozen Sunni cities and in Baghdad over the years, I subscribe to the Anti-Terror Camp.

The Sectarian Camp, on the other hand, believes Iraq is being torn apart by religion, not terrorism. Removing the terrorists will not remove the root cause of the violence. An intransigent hostility between the Shiites and Sunnis will lead inevitably to a full civil war and sweeping ethnic cleansings - regardless of the current surge. So we should get out, because the situation is hopeless.

It is problematic whether the sectarian conflict has metastasized into the body polity, and the top levels of the Iraqi government have certainly performed poorly. But if we declare we're leaving on that account, chaos will ensue. When President Thieu in 1975 pulled back just one division, the whole country erupted in panic. If we pull out because we say the Iraqi government has failed, Prime Minister Maliki will pull back and retrench his forces. When he does, the potential for panic flashing across the country in a few days is real.

Iraq has a wide-open highway network that facilitates spontaneous mass movement. In April of 2004, I was with the task force of 200 armored vehicles that General Mattis sent 200 miles, from north of Ramadi all the way around Baghdad, in order to stop the pandemonium and armed bands spontaneously cascading down the highways. This will happen again if we leave before the Iraqi Army is ready to take over.

Conversely, if we believe the Iraqi forces are dominating the insurgents and can contain the centrifugal forces of the Shiite militias, then we'll withdraw combat units beginning in 2008 -- but leave a hefty presence behind. I am referring to advisers, logisticians and anti-terror combat units. We have 24,000 soldiers in Afghanistan; we would need many more than that in Iraq for years to come. Personally, I'd like to see us say we plan on having American troops in Iraq indefinitely - and repeat that every time we withdrew some of our troops. I'd like

to undercut AQI's morale by saying, we're going to continue killing and imprisoning you until there are none of you left.

In summary, I would make four points.

First, General Petraeus is our wartime leader. He has a smart, experienced staff. He will provide to you a fulsome, balanced assessment in September - far superior to anything you will hear in the interim.

Second, how you, our elected leaders, depict our withdrawal will have profound consequences. To a very large extent, you will shape the narrative, determining how our great nation is perceived and how friends and enemies respond to us.

Third, if the rationale for withdrawal is because Iraq seems hopeless, then leaving behind a residual force is fraught with peril. You cannot quit, and expect to manage what happens after you quit. Iraq, if it perceives it is being abandoned, could fly apart quickly.

Fourth, the rationale for withdrawal drives everything that comes thereafter. Why are we withdrawing? Is it because we as a nation have given up, concluding that full-scale civil war is inevitable; or has our military succeeded, allowing Iraqi forces to maintain stability?

I do not see a compromise "middle ground" between these two rationales.

Thank you.