

Opening Remarks by Hon. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
Ranking Republican Member
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
for hearing on Iraq with former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright
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We are all aware that our country is facing a trying situation in Iraq.

Success will be difficult under any circumstances, but the consequences of just giving up are beyond measuring.

In the increasingly politicized debate over our involvement, it is important to remember that, beyond the strategic reasons, our decision to undertake military action was driven by other considerations as well.

Prominent among these was: ending the slaughter of the population by Saddam Hussein, one of the most brutal dictators in history, who had murdered, raped, and tortured hundreds of thousands of Iraqis for decades.

And Operation Iraqi Freedom did just that.

U.S. forces, as they have done throughout history in other parts of the world, and joined by coalition forces, helped liberate the Iraqi people from oppression, and are helping to pave the way for them to take full control of their own destiny.

It has not been an easy task. We should not have assumed that it would be.

History has demonstrated that the struggles between those who cherish freedom and liberty, and those who are filled with hatred and intolerance, come with great challenges.

A firm U.S. commitment was required to rebuild and secure Europe in the aftermath of World War II.

Concurrently, we have witnessed on the African continent, what can happen when responsible nations do not act quickly to prevent mass murder and the most cruel, degrading, and inhumane treatment of human beings.

In Iraq, hundreds of thousands of people died as a result of Saddam's brutal actions, including 30,000 innocent human beings from chemical attack.

Saddam's campaign of terror against the Kurds killed as many as 100,000.

I am proud to say that my stepson, Dougie, and his wife Lindsay, both Marine fighter pilots, joined other brave Americans, in ridding the world of the regime responsible for these atrocities.

Some would argue that, in this regard, our intervention in Iraq parallels our intervention in the Balkans in the 1990's.

Despite the lack of an overt and immediate threat to our security, posed by developments in the Balkans, we led the international effort to end the ethnic slaughter in Bosnia and Kosovo.

In fact, Madam Secretary, in response to arguments raised by Colin Powell, then the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who argued against U.S. military involvement in the Balkans, you asserted:

“What’s the point in having this superb military you are always talking about if we can’t use it?”

More than a decade later, we and many other countries are still heavily involved in the region, in an effort to ensure lasting stability.

The principled argument you made for intervening in Balkans to prevent further slaughter is applicable to Iraq.

Would anyone argue that the Iraqi people are less deserving of our commitment than were the people in the Balkans?

President Clinton himself said in 1998 that:

“The United States favors an Iraq that offers its people freedom at home. I categorically reject arguments that this is unattainable due to Iraq’s history or its ethnic or sectarian make-up...”

This goal articulated by President Clinton and reaffirmed by President Bush as recently as last week, cannot be achieved without a coordinated effort between the U.S. and Iraq, and without the demonstrated commitment of both sides.

It certainly will never be accomplished if we weaken our resolve at this critical moment.

We must also consider the implications of our actions in Iraq for other U.S. security interests and foreign policy priorities in the region.

We must consider how our actions and policies will be interpreted by our enemies around the world.

If, instead of having U.S. troops reinforce Iraqi capabilities to combat the insurgents, so that Iraqi forces can establish and provide for their own security, we, instead, abandon the Iraqi people, Iran and Syria would feel vindicated in their support for terrorist attacks in Iraq and elsewhere.

Iran would be greatly encouraged in its efforts to achieve regional dominance and to defy efforts to stop it from acquiring nuclear weapons.

These would be but a few of the profoundly negative and long-lasting consequences of a knee-jerk abandonment of Iraq at this time.

Unquestionably, the major responsibility for a solution in Iraq lies with the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people.

As part of the effort to establish stability and lasting security in Iraq, all ethnic and religious leaders must commit to national reconciliation and work to deny the insurgents the recruits, support, and political cover they require.

The Iraq Study Group report places security and stability on the top of the list of priorities in Iraq.

Without significantly reducing the level of sectarian violence and effectively combating the insurgents and their death squads, little progress can be expected in establishing peace and stability in Iraq.

As part of the effort to stabilize Iraq, it has been emphasized, that it is essential that the Iraqi government reach a power-sharing agreement with secular and moderate Sunni leaders, whereby major issues such as oil revenue distribution and Iraq's constitution are quickly resolved.

The Iraq Study Group and the Administration contend that, addressing these issues, would likely lead to a significant reduction in the current level of insurgency and instability in Iraq.

In his address to the nation last week, President Bush stated that:

“[i]n keeping with the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, we will increase the embedding of American advisers in Iraqi Army units, and partner a coalition brigade with every Iraqi Army division. We will help the Iraqis build a larger and better-equipped army, and we will accelerate the training of Iraqi forces, which remains the essential U.S. security mission in Iraq.”

The President's plan also includes doubling the number of provincial reconstruction teams.

This will bring together military and civilian experts to help Iraqis strengthen the moderates, pursue national reconciliation, and accelerate the pace toward achieving Iraqi self reliance.

Given former Secretary Albright's particular expertise, I would ask that she share with us her recommendations for specific benchmarks that we should require of the Iraqi

leadership and, to what extent, should we link progress on the Iraqi political front to our support on the security front.

I also look forward to your detailed recommendations for the concrete steps the U.S. must take if it is to achieve its political and economic goals in Iraq.

The Iraqis will need our assistance and a commitment that is just as credible in the face of great difficulties, as that which the U.S. has demonstrated in the Balkans.