

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 25, 2008

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Chairman Kerry Statement at Christopher Hill Nomination Hearing

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) released the following opening remarks delivered at the nomination hearing for Christopher Hill, President Obama's nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to Iraq.

Full text as prepared is below:

This Committee will hold many hearings this year, but few more important than this week's confirmation hearings for Ambassadors to Iraq and Afghanistan. 143,000 American military personnel remain in harm's way in Iraq and about 40,000 more are in Afghanistan. The outcomes of these wars will have profoundly important consequences for our nation. And diplomacy will be crucial to determining these outcomes.

We begin today with Iraq. In Ambassador Christopher Hill, President Obama has chosen an extraordinarily talented Foreign Service professional with a long and distinguished record of service to be Ambassador to Iraq.

Often, the reward for diplomats who succeed in difficult postings with long odds is tougher assignments with longer odds. Ambassador Hill has made a career, now entering its fourth decade, of tackling seemingly intractable diplomatic challenges.

And make no mistake: Iraq today still presents extraordinary challenges. While we have set a timetable for withdrawing our troops, as many of us have long advocated, our work there is far from finished. The days when we could hope to impose solutions in Iraq are long past. It is the Iraqis who will ultimately determine their own future. Our task is to leverage our troops' redeployment into a sustainable political accommodation that prevents Iraq from sliding back into widespread ethnic or sectarian violence. To succeed, we will need to address Iraq's potentially volatile internal conflicts and complex regional dynamics through a series of overlapping diplomatic and political initiatives involving a multitude of actors.

Fortunately, Ambassador Hill brings particular talents and experience well-suited to this mission. In addition to serving as Ambassador to Macedonia, Poland and South Korea, he was also Special Envoy to Kosovo in 1999 and one of the top negotiators of the 1995 Dayton Accords that ended the war in Bosnia—both of which gave him crucial experience solving the complex problems of ethnic civil wars. And as we all know, as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Special Envoy to the Six Party Talks, he had to coordinate delicate multilateral negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program while dealing directly with an extremely difficult regime in Pyongyang.

Ambassador Hill, all of your considerable skills will be called upon in Iraq. And among the many challenges you will face there, I would like to focus on several which I believe will be critical to our success:

First, resolving the status of Kirkuk and other disputed territories. Arab – Kurdish tensions run high in Kirkuk, which remains a potential flashpoint for violence, and meaningful efforts to reach agreement on Kirkuk’s final status cannot be put off indefinitely. In Mosul, a strong showing in recent provincial elections by an anti-Kurdish coalition illustrated rising tensions there, as did a tense military standoff in Diyala province last summer between the Iraqi army and Kurdish peshmerga . If progress is not made in defusing Arab-Kurdish tensions while American forces remain in Iraq, the window for a peaceful resolution of Kirkuk and other disputed territories may close.

Second, passing the oil laws. Despite repeated assurances that an agreement was near, negotiations to finalize a series of laws regulating Iraq’s oil resources appear to be no closer to completion now than they were two years ago. The fundamental issue is a disagreement between Baghdad and the Kurds on the Kurdish region’s ability to enter into oil exploration and production contracts. Though the Iraqis, to their credit, have been sharing oil revenues, the country still lacks an overarching legal and political framework for its oil industry, the lifeblood of the country’s economy. Again, time is of the essence because developments on the ground will only make a solution more difficult.

Third, involving Iraq’s neighbors in stabilizing the country. I have long encouraged vigorous, sustained diplomacy to encourage Iraq’s neighbors, including Iran and Syria, to play more constructive roles in Iraq. The Arabs have begun to cautiously engage with Iraq, and they should be encouraged to do more. I believe that as Ambassador to Iraq, you will have an important role to play in this process. Your predecessor, Ambassador Crocker, had three rounds of meetings with his Iranian colleague in 2007. I hope that the Administration will strongly consider restarting these talks.

Fourth, full integration of the Sunnis. Although some progress has been made in incorporating Sunni Arabs into Iraq’s new political structure, December’s parliamentary elections can play a key role in consolidating this process. Integrating the Sunni militias which played such a key role in turning the tide in Iraq remains a major concern: According to recent press reports, only five percent of the “Sons of Iraq” have been hired into the Iraqi security forces or otherwise given the government jobs they were promised, and the deBaathification process remains stalled. If this situation is not addressed, it will significantly increase the possibility that Iraq’s Sunni Arab population could again take up arms against the central government.

Fifth, addressing refugees and internally displaced persons. Millions of Iraqis – perhaps as many one in six – have been forced to flee. The unwillingness or inability of the vast majority to return to their homes is an indicator of Iraq’s continuing instability and a potential source of future conflict. Iraqi’s religious and ethnic minorities are particularly at risk. This is a problem that will only grow worse if it not addressed.

Finally, the importance of training Iraq's security forces cannot be overstated if they are to be fully capable of independent action once we leave. This highlights the importance of achieving a high degree of civil-military cooperation between our diplomats and soldiers in Iraq. I strongly believe that one of the principle reasons that General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker were able to accomplish so much is because they worked together so closely.

I know that General Petraeus' successor, General Ray Odierno, is looking forward to building a similar relationship with you—which is why both men, and Ambassadors Crocker, Khalilzad, and Negroponte have spoken of the need to get to our ambassador to Baghdad as quickly as possible. I understand that some of my colleagues may be considering holding up a vote on Ambassador Hill's nomination until after the upcoming recess. Of course, Senators have every right to vote against Ambassador Hill. But I believe that using Senate procedures to delay his arrival to Baghdad at a critical time in this war would do a serious disservice to our efforts there.

This is not a time for delay. As the Pentagon made clear last week, "It is vital that we get an ambassador in Baghdad as soon as possible...because there is no substitute for having the president's envoy, the U.S. ambassador, in place and on the job."

This committee will move to quickly discharge Ambassador Hill, who has committed to depart for Iraq within a day of his Senate confirmation. I told him I would do everything I could to see that he gets that chance. I look forward to hearing his thoughts on America's path forward in Iraq.

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