

Testimony to the Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees  
6 September, 2007  
Update on Iraq  
William J. Perry

In January, President Bush rejected the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group and announced a new strategy in Iraq, which has been called a “surge strategy.” The surge strategy called for adding about 30,000 additional troops and, with this new strength, working aggressively to stem the violence in Iraq, especially in Baghdad. The hopes were that a reduction in violence would give the Iraqi government the breathing space it needed to strengthen its own security forces and to effect the political changes needed to reduce the impetus for the ongoing violence between Shia and Sunnis. By June the full complement of about 30,000 additional troops were operational in Iraq.

Based on reports already available from Iraq, it appears to me that there are three positive developments in Iraq.

First, wherever American troops are present and patrolling in force, violence does subside. This is a great tribute to the courage, discipline, and unit cohesion of our troops, but has come at a cost of almost 2,000 American casualties this summer.

Second, violence continues to be at relatively low levels in Kurdistan, as the Kurds have managed to stay largely apart from the sectarian violence that has plagued the mixed sectarian regions in Central Iraq and the struggle for control between Shia tribes in Southern Iraq.

And third, a new dynamic has been developing in the Sunni regions in Al Anbar province. About a year ago, Sunni tribal leaders began cooperating with Americans in fighting Al Qaeda in Iraq, which previously had gained a strong toehold in that province. The decision of the Sunni tribal leaders not only has resulted in effective actions against Al Qaeda forces, but also in reduced attacks against American forces in Al Anbar.

All of these are positive developments; the first is related directly to the surge;

the second is largely unrelated to the surge; and the third was well underway before the surge, but the additional American forces sent to Al Anbar have likely accelerated its progress.

But the surge was intended to buy time for actions taken by the Iraqi government to strengthen their security forces and to effect political reconciliation. So it is fair to ask how well have they made use of that time? And how much more time will be needed?

The GAO report released earlier this week paints a discouraging picture of how well the Iraqi government has made use of their breathing space. Of the benchmarks established well over a year ago by the Iraqi government of progress they themselves thought necessary, only a few of 18 have been met, with little or no progress on the most important of these benchmarks---those that are intended to effect a reconciliation between Shias and Sunnis. If this reconciliation cannot be achieved, all of the progress made at great cost this past summer could be overturned. In particular, the strengthening of the Sunni tribal militias in Al Anbar, which are an important asset in the present fight against Al Qaeda, could become a liability if they were to be turned against Shia militia or even Iraqi government forces.

These and other negative developments can be prevented as long as there is a strong American military presence, but that raises a fundamental question. How much longer can American forces be kept at or near present levels in Iraq without damaging the readiness of our ground forces? I estimate that if present ground force levels are maintained into next year, they can only be achieved through substantial changes in personnel policies, such as further extending deployments, recalling guard forces that have already served, or reducing training between deployments.

A combination of these policies, maintained during the coming year could do substantial damage to our ground forces. It took many years after the Vietnam War to build up our ground forces into the best-trained, most effective force in the world, and it could take many years to recover that capability if we were to lose it. Given the uncertain world in which we live, any substantial loss in capability of our ground forces could reduce our capability to deal with plausible military contingencies, while at the same time, making those contingencies more likely.

Later this month, the Congress will get a progress report on the surge strategy, including a report from General Petraeus. I have no doubt that General Petraeus is an outstanding military officer and is carrying out a well-conceived military strategy in Iraq. But solutions to the violence in Iraq cannot be military only, nor can they be coming from coalition forces only. The Iraqi government must be taking political actions on an urgent time scale, and they must be effectively preparing to take charge of their own security. A heavy American military commitment in Iraq cannot be sustained many more months without taking serious risks of reducing the capability of our ground forces, thereby making them less capable of meeting other security problems we face.

While it is possible at some future date to make increases in the level of American ground troops, that resource is fixed today and for some time to come; therefore we have to choose what risks to take when we determine how to use that resource. We can estimate with some confidence the risk to American security if our troop readiness suffers because we maintained large troop levels in Iraq through 2008. We cannot estimate with the same confidence the risk to American security if the level of violence in Iraq increases as we begin troop reductions early in 2008, as recommended by the Iraq Study Group.

But, in the absence of real progress in political reconciliation in Iraq, the level of violence is likely to increase whether we begin those reductions five months from now or five years from now.

Consequently, I suggest that, after hearing the Iraq progress report later this month, the Congress should ask the following questions.

Since the surge began earlier this year, how well has the Iraqi government used the breathing space it provided?

How much longer will coalition forces be needed to provide breathing space for the Iraqi government?

In order to achieve American goals in Iraq, how much longer will American forces be needed at or near present levels in Iraq?

Is the readiness level of American contingency forces today adequate to meet plausible contingencies?

If present or near-present levels of troops are needed in 2008 in Iraq, how will the replacement forces be provided, and what will this do to the readiness levels of our contingency forces?

I believe that continuing Congressional support for the surge strategy should be based on the answers to these questions, and a considered evaluation of how well this strategy meets overall American security requirements.