

U.S. Strategy in Iraq

A “Third Way” Alternative

TESTIMONY

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to appear before you today, and to share my views on a possible “third way” strategy alternative to the two currently dominating the ongoing public debate.

Introduction

Insurgencies are protracted by nature. Thus COIN [counterinsurgency] operations always demand considerable expenditures of time and resources The population must have confidence in the staying power of both the counterinsurgents and the HN [host nation] government. Insurgents and local populations often believe that a few casualties or a few years will cause the United States to abandon a COIN effort

Executing COIN operations is complex, demanding, and tedious. There are no simple, quick solutions. Success often seems elusive.

Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*

After a year, the Surge in Iraq is about to come to an end. Plans have been announced to withdraw five U.S. combat brigades from Iraq in the coming months. While the Surge has achieved notable successes, victory is not yet in sight. More needs to be done. A strategy must be crafted that will guide our actions beyond this campaign, lest we fail to capitalize on its gains and neglect key outstanding issues the Surge did not address. I applaud this subcommittee for raising awareness of the importance of crafting such a strategy, whose success or failure will likely shape our national security for years, if not decades, to come.

I recently had the pleasure of discussing this issue with a senior British MP closely involved with defense matters. While unfailingly polite, he did finally work his way around to posing the question, “When will your presidential candidates come to a serious debate regarding your Iraq strategy?”

Indeed, when will we “come to a serious debate?” The dialogue so far seems divorced from the very definition of strategy, which involves how we go about employing the means available to us—soldiers, equipment, leaders, and other resources—to achieve the ends we seek.

Victory on the Cheap

The Bush Administration’s initial strategy for Iraq might be dubbed “Victory on the Cheap.” The hope was that, as in the Balkans and, early on, in Afghanistan, stability could be achieved relatively quickly and with a minor infusion of American ground forces. While the means employed were to be modest, the ends we sought were anything but—creating a functioning democracy in a multiethnic Arab state that had never known one. This imbalance of ends and means has led most strategists to seek more modest ends for Iraq: some form of power sharing and wealth (i.e., oil revenue) sharing among the three principal groups—Shi’ia Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds; an end to large-scale sectarian violence; an Iraqi government opposed to militant Islamic terrorism; and a commitment not to pursue nuclear weapons.

Still, these objectives are modest only in relation to those the Bush Administration originally set out to achieve. Most would agree that, given the means at hand, they are formidable, indeed. Yet can we further reduce our war aims? Can we accept an Iraq that is a haven for radical Islamists? An Iraq that is pursuing weapons of mass destruction? An Iraq awash in violence that would draw

in external powers and extend the conflict beyond its borders, with all this implies for the region's stability and the stability of already precarious global energy markets?

None of the major candidates in either party who seek the presidency are declaring their willingness to risk these outcomes in Iraq. But what strategies are they offering that will guide the U.S. effort in Iraq beyond the Surge?

Withdrawal Without Consequences

Some candidates are advocating a strategy that might be described as “Withdrawal without Consequences.” This strategy notes that the American people are tired of a war in which victory seems just as elusive today as it did a year ago, or two years ago, or three years ago. They argue the United States simply lacks the means to achieve the ends it seeks, no matter how it employs them (i.e., no matter what strategy it chooses to pursue). Not only have the American people soured on the war, they assert, but our Army is perilously overstretched, and in danger of “breaking.”

Thus the United States needs to withdraw and allow Iraqis to determine their own destiny. Some make a virtue of necessity, noting that as long as Americans are in Iraq providing security and helping keep the country together, the Iraqis are content to let them shoulder the burden. Put another way, the more the Americans put their shoulder to the wheel, the less the Iraqis are inclined to do so. By setting firm withdrawal dates, goes the argument, we are forcing the Iraqis to undertake the difficult steps on political reconciliation, security and wealth sharing that they have been ducking.

Some who advocate the Withdrawal Strategy seek to hedge against too precipitous a pullout by declaring that we might maintain some small number of military advisors in Iraq to assist indigenous security forces, and some special forces to hunt down terrorists operating in the country. We might also, they note, maintain an “overwatch” force in Kuwait or elsewhere in the Persian Gulf region in the event things go badly and we need to take action.

While attractive on its face—it offers a dramatic near-term reduction in the means currently being employed (over 150,000 troops and roughly \$100 billion per year)—the strategy contains several major flawed assumptions that render its success a high-risk proposition.

First, setting a firm date for a U.S. withdrawal is far more likely to stimulate Iraq's main subgroups to begin preparing for all-out conflict with one another than to promote reconciliation. Prior to the surge, when the United States repeatedly attempted to assign the security mission to the Iraqis themselves (recall the mantra “As they stand up, we stand down”), the results were hardly encouraging. Indeed, one reason for the Surge's success in reducing violence was its realization that U.S. forces had to be involved in providing security. Simply stated, the Americans have been the moderating influence that has kept the Iraqis from descending into a full-scale civil war.

This should not be surprising. After centuries of rivalry, and decades of oppression under Sunni Arab rule following the creation of Iraq, there is little trust between the country's three major subgroups. Given this, it strains credulity to think that less than three years after the Iraqi people ratified their constitution—with several major issues left outstanding—they can easily put these old animosities behind them. By comparison, consider that 72 years after our constitution was ratified in 1789, many people—including men like Robert E. Lee—still saw themselves more as citizens of their respective states than as Americans. How long will it be, for example, before a

Shi'ia Arab sees him/herself as an Iraqi first and a Shi'ia Arab second? It is a hard truth that achieving U.S. objectives in Iraq will require a sizeable long-term American military presence. The hard choice is either accepting this, or running the risks outlined above. There is no "Withdrawal Without Consequences."

Second, those advocating this strategy would do well to recall the axiom that "power abhors a vacuum." As the United States pulls its forces out, others with strong interests in the ultimate disposition of Iraq will be motivated to shape events as best they can. Iran has heavily infiltrated Iraq. Turkey has already taken minor military action against the Kurds. Several Sunni Arab states have supported the insurgents, directly or indirectly. It strains credulity to think that these states, whose security depends on how things sort out in Iraq, will refrain from attempting to influence events, to include supporting (or, in Turkey's case, suppressing) an Iraqi faction engaged in civil war.

Third, the idea that U.S. troops would be reintroduced into Iraq from their "overwatch" bases also is difficult to accept. If today America lacks the means to achieve its goals in Iraq, how could it do so under conditions far worse than those that exist at present? To be sure, one could imagine U.S. troops being deployed, but their mission would likely be to rescue American diplomats and Army advisors whose safety is endangered by the spreading disorder.

In sum, the "Withdraw Without Consequences" strategy is more a strategy of hope, which assumes a high level of risk to U.S. security interests in order to account for the inadequate means—both in terms of resources and national will—we have devoted to achieving our objective.

Stay the Course

Several candidates advocate a strategy of “Staying the Course” in Iraq. They note the Surge’s success in enhancing security and reducing violence; exploiting the opportunity presented by the “tribal awakening” in Anbar province against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI); enabling modest improvements in the Iraqi Army and even the police forces; and nudging the country’s factions into some potentially significant steps toward reconciliation.

The problem with this strategy, as pointed out by those advocating “Withdrawal Without Consequences,” is that the United States lacks the means to continue operating at Surge levels. To be sure, the American public has been encouraged by the Surge’s success, and other issues, such as the state of the economy, have deflected their attention. Yet the Army remains overstretched. And the Surge’s success is, to a great extent, the result of good fortune rather than careful design.

As reflected in the administration’s belated decision to increase active Army end strength by 65,000 soldiers (and the Marine Corps by 27,000 marines), America’s ground forces are not sufficiently large to sustain the current level of commitment to Iraq while maintaining readiness for other contingencies. Indeed, most of the brigades not currently deployed overseas lack the equipment necessary to be at full readiness should another crisis arise.

The administration is attempting to remedy this shortfall, in part, through the widespread use of commercial security contractors, who according to one senior Army official number in the tens of thousands. The problem, of course, is that these contractors may actually have produced more harm than good. As one Army general observes

These guys run loose in this country and do stupid stuff. There’s no authority over them, so you can’t come down on them hard when they escalate force. They shoot people, and someone else has to deal with the aftermath. It happens all over the place.¹

Attempts to increase the Army’s size may prove too little, too late, given the glacial pace at which the Service is increasing its ranks. Why the apparent lack of urgency? It has nothing to do with sluggishness on the Army leadership’s part, and everything to do with the limits on the ability to recruit volunteers to engage in hazardous duty.

There are very likely clear limits on the size of an all-volunteer ground force the Army and Marine Corps can achieve without dramatically increasing the pay and bonuses of soldiers and marines. The annual cost for American active duty personnel is already at historic highs. For example, between the start of the Second Gulf War and the end of last year, the Army had to increase the amount spent on retention bonuses by nearly an order of magnitude, from \$85 million to \$735 million.² At the same time, the cost to support each soldier, as measured by

¹ Jonathan Finan, “Security Contractors in Iraq Under Scrutiny After Shootings,” *Washington Post*, September 10, 2005, p. 1. The observation was made by Brigadier General Karl R. Horst, Deputy Commanding General, 3rd U.S. Infantry Division.

² Tom Vanden Brook, “Army Pays \$1 Billion to Recruit and Retain Soldiers,” *USA Today*, April 12, 2007, p. 8.

personnel costs, increased by well over 50 percent since 2001, from \$75,000 to \$120,000 per soldier in 2006.³

Moreover, despite these substantial increases in the financial incentives being offered to Americans to serve in the military, there are worrisome indicators that the quality of the force has declined, perhaps significantly. The Army granted some 8,500 moral waivers for recruits in 2006, more than triple the 2,260 granted a decade ago. Waivers for recruits who committed felonies were up 30 percent in 2006 over 2005. The Army is also accepting more high school dropouts. Last year roughly 82 percent of Army recruits had high school diplomas, compared to a benchmark of 90 percent. This is the lowest rate since 1981, when the Army was beginning to come out of the depths of the “hollow force” of the immediate post-Vietnam era.⁴

The Army’s problems do not end there. Only 61 percent of Army recruits scored above average on the Service’s aptitude test for recruits in 2006, the lowest scores since 1985. The Army has lowered its weight standards for recruits and increased the recruiting age to the point where it would not have met its recruiting targets in 2006 without those recruited who are over the age of 35.⁵ It seems evident, then, that even the dramatic increases in financial incentives instituted in recent years are not, by themselves, sufficient to attract enough higher quality personnel to fill even its current force requirements, much less a substantially larger force.

Even more worrisome is the fact that, despite the lower quality of recruits being accepted in the Army, the Army’s basic trainee graduation rate leaped from 82 percent in 2005 to 94 percent in 2006.⁶ This result seems counter-intuitive. Why is it happening? Why are lower quality recruits graduating at a higher level than their more qualified predecessors? The likely answer: maintaining tough basic training programs increases the number of “washouts” while reducing the number of graduates ready to fill the ranks. Given the choice of sending units to combat zones at substantially less than full strength, or sending them with less than the best recruits, the Army, forced to make a difficult choice, is opting for the latter.

The Army is also having problems filling its officer requirements. For example, the Active Component was short some 3,000 officers in 2006. Meanwhile, the Guard and Reserve confront a shortfall of nearly 7,500 officers.⁷ Recent declines in retention rates of West Point graduates are also a source of concern.⁸

Under these conditions, despite the Army’s shortage of soldiers—both in quantity and quality—it may take five years to increase its ranks by 35,000. While the Marine Corps’ problems do not appear to be as severe as the Army’s, the Marines also plan to take up to five years to increase

³ Greg Jaffe, “Despite a \$168 Billion Budget, Army Faces Cash Crunch,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 12, 2006.

⁴ Tom Vanden Brook, “Older Recruits are Finding Less Success in Army,” *USA Today*, February 19, 2007.

⁵ Tom Vanden Brook, “Older Recruits are Finding Less Success in Army,” *USA Today*, February 19, 2007; and Associated Press, “Lower Standards Help Army Meet Recruiting Goal,” *USA Today*, October 9, 2006.

⁶ Vanden Brook, “Older Recruits are Finding Less Success in Army,” *USA Today*, February 19, 2007.

⁷ Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Military Personnel: Strategic Plan Needed to Address Army’s Emerging Officer Accession and Retention Challenges* (Washington, DC: GAO-07-224, January 2007), p. 27; and Greg Jaffe, “Despite a \$168B Budget, Army Faces Cash Crunch,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 12, 2006.

⁸ Bryan Bender, “West Point Grads Exit Service at High Rate,” *Boston Globe*, April 11, 2007, p. 1.

their ranks by 22,000.⁹ Simply stated, we appear to be reaching the size limit on our ground force structure, unless we are willing to resort to extreme measures such as conscription, or, as some propose, offering citizenship to foreigners who are willing to fight Americans' battles for them.¹⁰

But the challenge of "Staying the Course" does not end with limits on the size of our ground forces. Much of the Surge's success can be attributed to the leadership of senior American commanders like General Petraeus and Lieutenant General Odierno, as well as Ambassador Crocker. Yet General Odierno is being replaced, and there are already rumors circulating regarding who might be tapped as General Petraeus' replacement.

Despite history's long chronicle of the importance of great commanders and civilian leaders to success in war, the administration and the military services persists in the belief that one general is just as good as another, and that diplomats are generally interchangeable as well. But as our history has shown, it makes a difference whether an army is commanded by a Washington rather than an Arnold, by a Grant rather than a McClellan, by an Abrams rather than a Westmoreland. Yet when we find exceptional commanders, they are typically rotated out so that the next general in line can have his "turn." As one senior Army officer remarked to me, "The Army would rather lose this war than change its personnel system." The practice of playing Russian roulette with our field commanders has finally produced serendipitous results with the current senior commanders. But "Staying the Course" must mean keeping proven commanders in the field.

Similarly, the Surge has succeeded in no small measure because General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker are both highly capable and willing to cooperate with one another. This is again the product of serendipity, as neither Petraeus nor Crocker is in charge in Iraq. In fact, the United States has no single person in charge in Iraq and, short of the president, no one in charge of the war in Washington on a day-to-day basis. This "business-as-usual" approach to the war violates the long-standing military principal of unity of command. As FM 3-24 declares

*Campaign design may very well be the most important aspect of countering an insurgency Design should reflect a comprehensive approach There should be only one campaign and therefore one design. The single campaign should bring in all players, with particular attention placed on host nation participants. [emphasis added]*¹¹

Yet how can unity of purpose and of action be achieved with the host nation if every senior U.S. official is free to pursue his/her own version of a strategy?

A Third Option

No strategy is without its risks, because no country has ever had unlimited means with which to achieve the end it seeks. Thus the test of any strategy is its ability to maximize the chances of achieving the goals set forth. (Or, if you prefer, to minimize the risk of failure.) The strategies of "Victory on the Cheap," "Withdrawal Without Consequences," and "Stay the Course" do not meet this test. They either are too ambitious for the means at hand, or run a very high risk of

⁹ The Marine Corps has traditionally had less difficulty filling its ranks than the Army, in no small measure because while the Army is well over twice the size of the Marine Corps, both recruit from the same manpower pool.

¹⁰ This latter option has gained some currency in some quarters across the political spectrum.

¹¹ U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, p. 4-9.

failure. What might we salvage from the ideas put forth from each in crafting a more effective strategy?

To begin, our leaders must live up to their charge: they must lead. This means confronting the American people with difficult truths. Simply put, for the United States to have a reasonable chance of achieving its minimal objectives in Iraq, it will likely require a significant, long-term residual military presence in that country—perhaps as many as 35-40,000 troops. To paraphrase the old rationale for the American military presence in Europe during the Cold War, this is necessary in order to “keep the Iraq’s external predators out, and its internal factions down.”¹² The American people must accept that there are no easy exits from Iraq that do not threaten their vital security interests. This will require entering into a security partnership with the Iraqis, something our earstwhile seem to be gradually accepting as they ponder the prospect of life without an American presence.

Yet even getting to a residual force level will not be easy, much less assured. As the Surge winds down, what elements of a successor strategy might we pursue? The following are key elements of a “Third Way” strategy intended, over time, to enable the United States to maintain a residual force in Iraq along the lines described above, with the consent of the Iraqi government, in an environment of minimal violence.

Reinforce Success. The adoption—at long last—of counterinsurgency operations by the U.S. military and its Iraq counterparts is enhancing security. This is necessary both to reassure the Iraqi people and to enable the reconstruction and the promise of a better life. As the newly formed Army counterinsurgency doctrine correctly notes

The ultimate success in COIN is gained by protecting the populace, not the COIN [counterinsurgency] force [The reason for this is that] [p]opular support allows counterinsurgents to develop the intelligence necessary to identify and defeat insurgents.¹³

The logic is simple. If American and Iraqi forces know who the insurgents are and where they are, they can easily be defeated. This intelligence is overwhelmingly the province of the Iraqi people. If they feel secure and if they see their lives improving, they will be more likely to provide this intelligence. Thus the fundamental aspects of the Surge must be sustained, even as our troop levels are reduced.

Help the Iraqis Help Themselves. With U.S. forces drawing down from Surge levels in the coming months, it will be important that the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) take on more responsibility, operate effectively, and do not fall prey to sectarian influences. One key to success here will be the efforts of American Army advisors embedded with the ISF. Yet despite the long-term nature of standing up the ISF and ensuring it becomes a capable force, the Army has yet to take steps to establish an advisory corps, or anything like it. This forces the Army to strip other units of officers and NCOs to perform the advisor mission, something for which they receive minimal training. For these reasons, advisor duty is something that up-and-coming officers and NCOs seek to avoid, even though success here is critical to the overall success of the war effort.

¹² During the Cold War, it was said the NATO was needed to “keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”

¹³ U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, pp. 1-27, 1-29.

This needs to be corrected through the establishment of an advisory corps of sufficient size to support the ISF and Afghan National Army (ANA).

Pursue Reconciliation from the “Bottom Up” as well as the “Top Down.” Perhaps the greatest incentive for reconciliation at the national level—aside from the belief in an enduring U.S. military presence—comes from enabling reconciliation from the bottom-up, although this is not without its risks. As we have seen, inhabitants in some areas have shown a willingness to work with U.S. and Iraqi forces to provide for their own security. This can enable reconstruction to proceed with less fear of sabotage, and facilitate local elections as well. The prospect of “grass roots” leaders emerging may encourage the leaders of Iraq’s principal factions to engage in reconciliation efforts on a national level, lest they become less relevant. Perhaps the recent Justice and Accountability law passed to supercede the 2003 de-Ba’athification decree is reflective of this.

Keep America’s Best Commanders (and Diplomats) in the Fight. As noted above, some of our best military commanders are not in the fight, or are being reassigned out of the theater of war. Despite the use of “stop-losses” to prevent key personnel from being discharged from the Service, some officers, like LTG David Barno and MG Rick Olson, have been allowed to retire. It is long past time to stop relying on good fortune to insure that we have our best commanders in the field. Highly capable generals who have proven to have an exceptional ability to command in this different kind of war—men like LTGs Peter Chiarelli and James Mattis—should be assigned where they can put their experience to the best use.

Establish Unity of Command. Again, as noted above, we cannot rely on hope as a key element in our strategy. While General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker are a highly capable and effective team, one person must have responsibility for integrating the complex combination of security, intelligence, reconstruction and diplomatic elements that comprise the means through which U.S. strategy is implemented. As Field Manual 3-24 notes

Unity of effort must be present at every echelon of a COIN operation
Ideally, a single counterinsurgent leader has authority over all government agencies involved in COIN operations.¹⁴

The same should apply to the U.S. effort in Afghanistan and, especially, in Washington. Despite his many talents, it is unreasonable to assume that LTG Douglas Lute can direct the actions of senior administration officials like Secretary of State Rice or Secretary of Defense Gates. In contrast, consider that in early stages of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam during the Kennedy Administration, the counterinsurgency effort was put under the authority of two men: General Maxwell Taylor (soon to become JCS chairman) and Robert Kennedy, the president’s brother. There was no doubt regarding their political clout and ability to use it. We need similar senior leadership today.

Conclusion

The Third Way strategy offers no guarantees that we will achieve our minimal objectives in Iraq. Yet it does offer a better chance of doing so than the other strategies described above that have taken center stage in this election year. This is because it neither assumes resources that are not available nor argues that we can simply call it a day in Iraq and depart without consequences.

¹⁴ U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, p. 2-22.

In the end, America's next administration will confront a dilemma. For us to succeed in Iraq, the Iraqi people need to hear that we will support their efforts for as long as it takes to establish a stable regime that is not at the mercy of terrorists or their predator neighbors. Yet, to many Americans, success has simply been reduced to leaving Iraq, as quickly as possible, with little consideration being given to the potential consequences.

The next administration must confront this dilemma. We must get beyond the notion that there is a strategy that promises an easy out, or success at low cost. What we have ahead of us—whether we remain in Iraq or not—is the “long, hard slog” that Defense Secretary Rumsfeld saw coming when the “dead enders” in Iraq proved to be the leading edge of an insurgent movement. But although the road ahead will be difficult, I believe the American people are up to the challenge. Indeed, it is the willingness to take on difficult challenges—not to defer them or seek to avoid them so that they will become the burden of the next generation—that sets the measure of a generation.

President Kennedy put it best, perhaps, when he spoke to the “Cold War Generation” that followed the “World War II” age group that some have described as the “Greatest Generation.” The president noted the great—and difficult—challenges confronting America at that time, in particular the Soviet threat and the race to the moon. He encouraged his generation to take these challenges head-on:

We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.¹⁵

Thus strategy is greatly influenced by the leaders who craft it and implement it. The “Third Way” strategy presumes an administration that is willing to confront hard truths, to share them with the American people, to ask for sacrifice, and to argue that it is unwilling to postpone or evade the difficult challenges we confront here at home, in Iraq, and elsewhere are around the world.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

¹⁵ President John F. Kennedy, Address at Rice University, Houston, Texas, September 12, 1962. Cited at <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/003POF03SpaceEffort09121962.htm>, accessed on January 20, 2008.