

Op-Ed: Iraqis Must End Their Civil War

Iraqis Must End Their Civil War

By Congressman Steve Rothman

The following op-ed was originally published in the Bergen Record newspaper on Sunday, March 4, 2007.

Pictured: Rep. Rothman discusses Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) with a military expert during his trip. IEDs are widely considered the signature weapon of the Iraq War, causing more than 70 percent of U.S. casualties.

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I have just returned from a fact-finding mission to Iraq and Afghanistan with additional meetings in Pakistan, Turkey, Kuwait and Germany.

This was an opportunity to speak directly with the heads of state and chief ministers of these countries, as well as to the senior U.S. military commanders, diplomats, intelligence officers, combat troops, wounded soldiers and doctors. My purpose in going was to continue to refine my own view of America's national security interests in the region. While I'm sure that all of the lessons of this non-stop, eight-day marathon have not yet been completely absorbed, I do have some initial thoughts about what I saw and heard.

Foremost, I return to New Jersey with an even more profound and deeply heartfelt gratitude for the service of our brave young men and women in harm's way. In the aftermath of the Bush administration's disastrous decisions concerning troop levels and preparedness, our military is learning and adapting. The military commanders I met with said they appreciated the advocacy of military families, investigations of journalists and the voices of many concerned Americans that have helped to highlight problems and improve the conditions of our forces.

The issue, though, is not how long it will take our troops to do the jobs they have been given, but whether the United States government has given them the proper jobs to do. The violence in Iraq can be eliminated only through the exercise of the political and social will of the Iraqi people, not by imposing a U.S. military solution. Having our brave young men and women in Iraq being shot at and blown up is not forcing the Iraqis to live together in peace.

I continue to believe that it is in our national interests to redeploy all U.S. troops out of Iraq within six months. In the end, leaving Iraq's civil war will allow us to rebuild our depleted military, focus on homeland security and prepare for the real threats that face us in this hostile world—North Korea, Iran, the People's Republic of China and the Taliban and al-Qaeda, both resurgent in Afghanistan.

President Bush implies that al-Qaeda will take over Iraq if we leave. In my opinion, that is nonsense. Today, there are fewer than 2,000 al-Qaeda in Iraq. Not only do al-Qaeda adherents, who are Sunnis, kill Iraqi Shiites, they also kill Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds. The 26 million people in Iraq are slowly coming to appreciate the need to use their power to eliminate this relatively small, but ruthless group of foreign terrorists. The Iraqis have more than enough people, resources and military expertise to crush al-Qaeda, if they choose to do so.

Closing window of opportunity

The president also says that we cannot yet leave Iraq to the Iraqis because of the continuing violence among their Shia and Sunnis—even though we have trained over 350,000 Iraqi soldiers and special forces—without an open-ended commitment of U.S. combat troops. But most U.S. military commanders understand three things very clearly.

First, after nearly four years of countless policy blunders by the Bush administration, the American people will not allow an endless deployment of U.S. combat troops in Iraq. Second, the Iraqis must make a complete and demonstrable commitment to a unified country. Third, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1723, which approved the presence of the Multinational Force in Iraq, is up for reauthorization in December 2007 and this Iraqi government will probably request a reduction in size and mission for the MNF from the council. Thus, our military understands that its window of opportunity to complete operations, bring Iraqi ethnic groups together, and train Iraq's military is rapidly closing.

While it is true that the conflicts in Iraq are an Iraqi problem that must be fixed by the Iraqis, there is still a vitally important diplomatic and economic support role for the United States and the countries in the region. The well-being of the moderate Central Asian, Arab and Persian Gulf states is, after all, most threatened by further chaos in Iraq. These nations have a great stake in an Iraq that is not modeled after Iran, not antagonized by al-Qaeda, and not ruled by an Islamic fundamentalist theocracy.

For my part, the best news about Iraq today is that not only do our military commanders know that the time of massive deployments of U.S. forces must come to an end, but also that the Iraqi tribal leaders are finally showing signs that they know that there is an "immediacy" to their need to come together. The most troubling aspect is that there is no guarantee that the Iraqi people will do what they must do, as one united people, before it is too late.

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