

Op-Ed: The Iraq War Needs to End, Not Escalate

The War in Iraq Needs to End, Not Escalate

By Congressman Steve Rothman

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On Wednesday night, President Bush told the American people that he bore the responsibility for the many mistakes made in the prosecution of the war in Iraq. Then he announced that he planned to make yet another one -- he plans to escalate and extend the Iraq war. The President says he intends to send more than twenty thousand U.S. servicemen and women into Iraq, indefinitely. As has been the case with so many military, strategic and diplomatic decisions made by this President regarding Iraq, this too would be a terrible error.

This open-ended commitment of more U.S. troops will result in the death and wounding of thousands more American soldiers, cost U.S. taxpayers tens of billions of dollars more, and do nothing to help the Iraqi people resolve their civil war. In fact, this escalation will "turn up the heat" on the already boiling anti-American fanaticism in Iraq and the region. The President's plan also weakens our severely overstretched and depleted military and limits our ability to face the current and future threats to our country. In summary, President Bush's escalation of the Iraq war will hurt America's national security and I will do everything in my power to stop it.

As of today, more than 3,000 American servicemen and women have been killed in Iraq, nearly 23,000 have been wounded, and about half a trillion U.S. taxpayer dollars have been spent. U.S. military readiness has dropped to dangerously low levels. Equipment and personnel shortages are widespread. Nearly five years after 9/11, more U.S. taxpayer dollars have been spent in Iraq than on homeland security measures in the United States. Our country has sacrificed deeply to help the Iraqi people by removing the murderous dictator Saddam Hussein from power, training their military, spending billions to rebuild their infrastructure, and supporting them so that they could develop a democratic government. If we owed the Iraqi people a moral obligation after we initiated this war, we have long since met it. It is well past time for Iraq's new democratic leaders to take the steps necessary to develop a political solution that will end this civil war, without the U.S. military's involvement.

In his speech, the President continues to falsely maintain that a U.S. withdrawal would "bring al Qaeda closer to its goals of …launching new attacks on the United States at home and abroad." The Iraqi civil war was neither started nor does it continue because of the efforts of al Qaeda fighters. Al Qaeda's presence is only tolerated by rival Iraqi factions as long as U.S. troops remain in the country. In fact, one of the most troubling aspects of our involvement in Iraq is that the United States cannot fully focus on fighting America's real War on Terror, resulting in a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan and al Qaeda cells that persist in conducting their global terror campaign. The President's plan further exacerbates this problem, with no end in sight.

The President argues that the United States' national security interests would be hurt if we were to leave Iraq now. He says Iraq would become even more bloody and chaotic. However, a U.S. withdrawal should actually encourage an end to the Iraqi civil war by finally leaving the warring factions with no alternative but to finally work out their own differences. Iraq's neighbors would no longer be able to think of Iraq as "America's problem" and could be encouraged to help facilitate a resolution. After all, an unstable Iraq is especially harmful to the interests of every one of Iraq's neighbors. Furthermore by maintaining a modest-sized U.S. quick reaction military force nearby, those neighbors would be dissuaded from becoming overly aggressive. When all is said and done, however, ending the civil war in Iraq will happen only when the Iraqi people wish it to happen. The U.S. can offer advice and other assistance, but we need to remove our troops, rebuild our military, and let the world know that we are ready to counter the real threats to our national security.

As a member of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, I will work with my Democratic and Republican colleagues to take the steps necessary to persuade the President to reverse his course and bring our troops out of Iraq, without delay. This may well require a Congressional restriction on the President's use of federal dollars for anything beyond the protection and redeployment of our troops. It is my understanding that the President plans to request \$100 billion of additional funding for the war. While I will not abandon troops serving in Iraq, I will continue to oppose any

efforts to give the President a blank check to prolong this war.

The message sent by the American people in November was unmistakable - Americans want this war to end, not escalate. It appears that the President has not yet gotten that message.

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