

**Remarks by Congressman Marty Meehan**  
**“Iraq: Finding a Responsible Exit”**  
(as prepared for delivery at the Brookings Institution)

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It has been nearly two years since we invaded Iraq and removed one of the world’s most brutal regimes. But two years later, America’s armed forces are confronting a far more resilient enemy – a growing insurgency that has plunged Iraq into violence and chaos. The elections are drawing closer, but peace and stability seem to be moving farther and farther away.

How we got to this point in time has been the subject of extensive debate. How did our intelligence fail us so badly about Iraq’s WMD? Was intelligence deliberately manipulated by the Bush Administration in the rush to war? Why didn’t the Administration give the UN inspectors more time? How did we allow so much chaos to grow out of Saddam’s downfall? Why didn’t we have a better plan to secure the peace?

Many of us have strong views about these issues, and many of us have been quite vocal in expressing them. Unfortunately, when you have a hotly contested presidential campaign, the national debate often descends into starkly partisan terms. I believe this is what has happened to much of the debate about our policy in Iraq.

In Congress the partisanship was especially bad. Most Republicans saw it as their responsibility to defend the President’s policies, however flawed. Most Democrats viewed their role as questioning and criticizing all that went wrong without necessarily offering policy alternatives. The result has been a failure to forge a bipartisan consensus and develop answers to the pressing questions about our involvement in Iraq. By rallying behind the Administration’s policies, the Republican Congress failed in its responsibility to lead – and not just follow – on issues of war and peace. At the same time, many Democrats who opposed the war from the beginning have spent more energy lamenting the past than thinking about solutions for the future.

A substantive, non-partisan reassessment of America’s goals and options in Iraq is long overdue. The time has come for us to change our focus from the missteps of the past to the challenge that confronts us in the immediate future. When I visited our soldiers on the frontlines, they weren’t focused on the mistakes of last year. They were concerned about what we’re doing today and tomorrow. Now more than ever, with our current policy going nowhere, America needs to forge bipartisan consensus behind a responsible strategy for Iraq.

Today I challenge my colleagues in Congress to work together to develop answers to the most urgent question facing our country today: How can the United States put Iraq on a path toward self-sufficiency and begin to bring our troops home in a way that advances our strategic interests?

We owe it to the American people. And we owe it to the brave men and women who are putting their lives on the line every day.

All of us in Congress have met with families of Guardsmen and Reservists whose deployments have been extended. We have spoken with too many mothers of soldiers – and attended too many funerals – to leave these fundamental questions unanswered. We must stop looking backward and thinking defensively. We must start looking forward and developing proactive ideas about the next steps in Iraq.

It's clear that the Administration has no endgame in sight. It's time for Congress to reassert its role in foreign policy and to take the lead in providing an exit strategy in Iraq.

### The Situation in Iraq

The first step toward an Iraq exit strategy is an honest assessment of the facts on the ground there. It's time to take off the rose-tinted glasses, put aside our partisan hostilities, and start with the basics: What's good and what's bad? What's still possible in Iraq? And how do we get there?

In search of answers to these questions, I returned to Iraq earlier this month with several of my congressional colleagues from the Armed Services Committee. The last time I was in Iraq was August of 2003 – four months after the fall of Baghdad. Iraq was hardly a safe place then. But we were able to walk the streets and talk with average Iraqis, something I had hoped to do this time.

Unfortunately, the threat of violence was simply too high. Baghdad is still a war zone. My colleagues and I traveled in heavily armored military convoys, zigzagging through the streets to avoid ambushes. In Iraq today, the expectation is that any American or anyone associated with the Americans will be attacked.

The United States has spent more than \$150 billion on military operations in Iraq, with another \$80 billion forthcoming. In today's news it was reported that the Army is planning on continuing these troops levels until 2007. We've maintained between 100,000 and 150,000 troops there for two years. Over the past year, America has sent more soldiers and more money to Iraq, but we have seen only more violence. As Iraq prepares to hold elections five days from now, the violence is worse than it has ever been.

All of us hope that the elections will proceed peacefully, safely, and with maximum participation. But we should be realistic that regardless of who votes or who wins, the insurgency will continue. When Saddam was captured, we hoped the insurgents would give up. When we transferred sovereignty, we hoped the violence would end. When we routed the insurgents in Fallujah, we hoped it would break their back. With each milestone, the insurgency has come back stronger and more deadly.

Attacks on U.S. forces have grown steadily, both in frequency and sophistication. Attacks on Iraqi security forces, civilians, and infrastructure are also on the rise. Michael O’Hanlon and others here at Brookings have developed an index that distills the situation in Iraq into raw numbers. According to the “Brookings Index,” Coalition forces have been killing and capturing 1,000 to 3,000 insurgents every month for more than a year. But over that same time, the insurgency has quadrupled its ranks from at least 5,000 to at least 20,000. More troubling is the network of Iraqi civilians – 200,000 by some estimates – who offer both active and passive support: arms, materiel, sanctuary, and most importantly, intelligence. In many instances, better intelligence than our forces have.

It is time to accept that one of the basic assumptions held by the Bush Administration – and many of its critics – no longer applies. More troops do not mean more security in Iraq. Despite 150,000 boots on the ground and tactical victories in Fallujah and elsewhere, the insurgency is only growing in size and lethal capacity.

It may have been possible at one point in time to pacify Iraq with an overwhelming American force. Had we gone in with “several hundred thousand troops” like General Shinseki said we would need, perhaps the insurgency never would have developed. We’ll never know for sure. But whatever chance we had is gone now. Ramping up our troop presence now will not turn the tables in Iraq, and it would probably make the situation worse. The undeniable fact is that the insurgency is being fueled by the very presence of the American military.

Back in July of 2003, Gen. John Abizaid called Iraq a “classic guerrilla war.” But we have continued to wage war as if we were fighting a conventional army. The result has been that the “center of gravity” of any counter-insurgency – the civilian population – has moved further and further away from us. The growing hostility is palpable when you’re in Iraq, and it is measured in polls taken of Iraqis by our own government. In November of 2003, only 11 percent of Iraqis said they would feel safer if Coalition forces left Iraq. Six months later, 55 percent did. In the most recent poll that asked the question, 2 percent viewed the United States as liberators, and 92 percent as occupiers.

Iraqis have grown tired of an occupation that has provided them neither security nor meaningful sovereignty. Iraqis were apprehensive of America’s intentions to begin with, and every time President Bush signals that our forces will remain in Iraq “for as long as it takes” it reconfirms their suspicion that we intend a permanent presence. Every time Iraqi citizens see a Bradley fighting vehicle rolling through their streets or a Blackhawk helicopter overhead, it undermines our assertion that Iraq is already sovereign. Every time Iraqi bystanders are killed in Coalition actions, it further erodes the good will we earned by ridding them of Saddam. And even when innocent Iraqis are murdered by insurgents, the United States is blamed for failing to provide security. If the world’s most potent army cannot make the streets safe, Iraqis are asking, is that really what we’re there for?

The first step in achieving stability in Iraq is recognizing that the U.S. presence has become inherently destabilizing. We also need to recognize the fact that for the most part, we are fighting not foreign terrorists or former regime loyalists but indigenous factions within Iraq who have united to against us. It’s a native insurgency, fueled by a combination of volatile ingredients: A population of 25 million, 5 million of them Sunnis, with a median age of 19 years old; A national jobless rate of 30-40 percent, with pockets of extreme unemployment; 400,000 skilled and experienced army soldiers,

dispersed throughout the country with their weapons but without their salaries or pensions; 4,000 shoulder-fired missiles left over from the old regime; and 250,000 tons of unsecured explosives.

The insurgency's size and strength are unlikely to decrease anytime soon. Attempting to kill or capture every last insurgent is an impossible task. And as long as that is the thrust of our strategy we will continue along a downward spiral.

### An Exit Strategy

Confronted with a growing, native insurgency, America is left with three options – and two of them are not really options at all.

The first option is to withdraw immediately. Given the current state of Iraqi security forces, this option is a non-starter. Even if you believe that the United States should never have entered Iraq, it doesn't follow that we should leave now. The chaos that would result would be much worse than the vacuum of authority left by the downfall of Saddam and the human consequences could be even greater. From a strategic standpoint, immediate withdrawal undermines America's credibility and destabilizes the entire region.

The second option is to stay on the same path, as the President says "for as long as it takes." I believe that this course of action would only cause the problem to grow worse. As late as May of 2003, the Administration was predicting that only 30,000 troops would remain in Iraq by the fall of that year. Twenty months later, five times that many remain. The most compelling reason not to continue down the same path is that the occupation has become counterproductive to stability and progress in Iraq. With U.S. forces serving as a focal point for tensions and violence, factions within Iraq have turned against us when they should be confronting each other. The indefinite U.S. presence is forestalling the political compromises that are ultimately necessary to end the violence in Iraq.

I am proposing a third option, that President Bush and Prime Minister Allawi announce a timetable for a phased drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq.

Changing the dynamic in Iraq means handing the security of the Iraqi people back to the Iraqis and bringing an end to the occupation. Under this proposal, the United States would draw down the majority of our forces by the end of this year. Only a small and mobile force would remain by mid-2006, two years after the transfer of sovereignty.

Announcing a timetable for a phased withdrawal over the next 12-18 months will change the underlying dynamic in Iraq in several ways.

First, it would help win the support of the Iraqi people for a political process and a government untainted by the appearance that the U.S. controls them.

Second, announcing a drawdown would splinter insurgent groups who have set aside their own differences to unite against the United States. Foreign jihadists, Sunni nationalists, and Shiite extremists have little in common except their opposition to the U.S. presence in Iraq.

Third, a timetable for withdrawal would encourage the Iraqi government and the factions within Iraq to deal with each other in setting up a new Iraqi government rather than relying on American troops to make the sacrifices. A withdrawal could be structured in such a way as to create incentives for violent factions within Iraq to come to the negotiating table rather than engaging in armed insurrection.

Fourth, renouncing any long-term presence in Iraq would enhance America's legitimacy throughout the world. It would be the first step in putting the divisions we've had with our allies behind us so we can focus on the war on terror.

Fifth, the central political question in Iraq is not whether the United States should leave, but how soon. The politics in Iraq are such that the incoming government – whoever it is – will demand the U.S.'s withdrawal as soon as it is confident of its own survival.

Finally, a timetable for withdrawal would be that light at the end of the tunnel for our military, which has been severely overstretched and unfairly deployed. While in Iraq, I met with many of our soldiers and Marines. Their spirits are high and morale is strong. They are prepared for any mission. But they and their families want a reasonable expectation of when this mission will end. From a standpoint of readiness, a phased drawdown in Iraq would forestall what could otherwise soon become a recruiting and retention crisis in the armed forces.

### A Realistic Strategy

We can withdraw the vast majority of our forces from Iraq by the end of this year under a realistic plan. This is not a cut and run strategy but a phased drawdown that would leave a small, mobile, and low-profile U.S. presence in Iraq for a reasonable timeframe. This smaller contingent of approximately 30,000 troops could continue to fill specialty roles, such as training Iraqi forces and engaging in quick strikes against insurgent or terrorist infrastructure that minimize the risk of civilian casualties. A smaller, more remote presence wouldn't patrol Iraqi cities but it would be enough to prevent outbreaks of civil warfare.

Two factors will allow Iraq to move forward while our troops come home. First, our highest priority must be on training high-quality Iraqi security forces. For too long, the Bush Administration assumed that Americans would bear an indefinite burden of security in Iraq. But lasting security can only be provided by Iraqis. In the words of President Bush, "ultimately the success in Iraq is going to be the willingness of the Iraqi citizens to fight for their own freedom." With the U.S. providing an open-ended guarantee for security, there's little urgency for Iraqis opposed to the insurgency to take charge and fight it. In addition, the training program was set back for months by a focus on quantity over quality. As Peter Khalil and others have observed and pointed out, a couple weeks training is not nearly enough.

While in Iraq, I met with General Petraeus and surveyed the training of Iraqi security forces. General Petraeus gets it. He knows that to fight a sophisticated insurgency these Iraqis will need to be highly skilled. Despite the rocky start, the training program is moving forward. I believe 12-18 months is enough time to train Iraqi security forces with the skills they'll need to confront the insurgency.

As important as training Iraqi security forces is creating jobs for Iraqis. It is outrageous that of the \$22 billion that Congress has committed to Iraq reconstruction, only \$4 billion has actually been spent. And a huge percentage of that money has gone to provide security for foreign contractors. When General Petraeus took the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne into Mosul, he used riches from Saddam's palaces to keep Iraqi army soldiers on the payroll. He invested in local reconstruction projects that put people to work immediately. It was one of the reasons that Mosul was relatively quiet for so long. It may not be a model of free market capitalism but it is a model for success in a country that is desperate for jobs. It's worth replicating. As the U.S. begins to reduce our military involvement in Iraq, our investment in Iraq's reconstruction must endure.

### Conclusion

Last week, President Bush spoke eloquently about America's special responsibility to spread freedom around the globe. But his Inaugural Address did not include a single mention of the actual war we are fighting – the war that 150,000 of our servicemen and -women are fighting, every day, in one of the most volatile and violent places on Earth. In the realm of rhetoric and abstraction, President Bush has clearly defined ideas about the struggle for human freedom. But his policy in Iraq has not yet included a clear plan for when or how we'll leave.

Our national conversation about Iraq needs more realism, and more focus on the future rather than the past. We need to refocus on our original goal – a stable Iraq that does not threaten its neighbors, develop WMD, export terrorism, or terrorize its own people. Hard experience and tragedy have taught us that prolonged military occupation in Iraq will not end the insurgency, stabilize Iraq, or bring us closer to our strategic goals. It will only bring more casualties, and more hatred toward America within Iraq and beyond.

Iraqis want freedom. They also want control over their daily lives and their country's future. The best hopes for a stable, peaceful, democratic Iraq are achieved by making it clear to Iraqis that the occupation is not indefinite – that soon they will bear the burden of creating a responsible, democratic state.

Iraq's political development is occurring on a clearly defined timetable – elections this Sunday, a constitution drafted by August 15, an election to ratify the Constitution by October 15, new elections before December 15, and a permanent government in place by the end of December. Iraq needs a similar timetable for taking responsibility for its security.

By laying out a timetable for a phased withdrawal, the United States sends a clear message to Iraqis and all citizens of the world: We believe Iraq is capable of governing itself and making decisions about its future.

The removal of Saddam Hussein was a victory for the United States. But lasting success in Iraq won't be achieved until the country is stable – and the last American soldiers have come home.

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