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A CONVERSATION ON IRAQ WITH
SENATOR JOSEPH R. BIDEN JR. (D-DEL.)

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MODERATOR:

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FEATURED SPEAKER:

SENATOR JOSEPH R. BIDEN JR. (D-Del.)

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. PASCUAL: Good afternoon and welcome to the Brookings Institution. My name is Carlos Pascual. I am Vice President and Director of the Foreign Policy Studies Program here at Brookings. At Brookings we have made a tremendous investment in understanding war and peace in the Middle East. We have done this through the Saban Center on Middle East Policy and we have started an Iraq Policy Project. That project has brought to the stage Senator Hagel, Majority Leader Hoyer, yesterday we had Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, and today we have the benefit of having a discussion with the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Joe Biden.

In just a couple of days we will be taking our focus on the Middle East to Doha where we will have a Focus on the Islamic World with about 200 people coming from the Middle East, the Gulf, North Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and is reflective of our commitment to engaging with the people of the Middle East and the Gulf, with Muslims, and with all communities in trying to understand the dynamics of change. What we are really committed to is thoughtful, nonpartisan analysis of the threats and the options that we face in the regionally, and in Iraq in particular. We want to be able to sustain honest and objective scrutiny of what works and what does not. We want to be able to get beyond the rhetoric of aspirations for democracy and hope and get to really what can be the realistic options to generate a more peaceful outcome in the region.

Senator Biden joins us today at a moment of monumental challenge Iraq where we can credibly argue that we face, first of all, a failed state if we define a failed state as one which cannot provide security, the rule of law, and deliver services for its people, and where we face as well a civil war where the citizens of Iraq are killing each other every month by the thousands, generating 2 million refugees and 1.6 million people who have been displaced internally. If these realities are plausible to you, then we must also think about whether the benchmarks that have been set for Iraq to in effect heal itself politically and economically, whether those benchmarks are realistic. More fundamentally, we need to confront the reality that civil wars in the end require a political agreement or a political truce, that force can play a role in urging people to the negotiating table, that when there is a political agreement that the use of military force is an important component in the enforcement of such agreements, but force in and of itself is not sustainable, and this we have found in Bosnia, Kosovo, Sudan, Lebanon, Mozambique, Congo, and even Northern Ireland and, hence, we should apply those lessons as well to Iraq.

We are especially thankful to Senator Biden in joining us today to discuss the realities and the prospects for diplomacy in Iraq because there needs to be we think such a focus on the political alternatives. Senator Biden in a floor speech that he gave in October 2002 stated, "There is a danger that Saddam's downfall could lead to widespread civil unrest and reprisals." That was in 2002. And he went on to say, "One-third of that population in Iraq hates the other two-

thirds of the population. The American people need to know that most experts believe Iraq will require considerable assistance politically, militarily, and economically. Indeed, these experts say we should speak not of the day after, but of the decade after."

Senator Biden did very thoughtfully look ahead to a reality that we are facing today, and today he is with us to talk about political alternatives that need to be put forward to help us think through what the possibilities in Iraq might be. In that spirit, Senator, we are very thankful for you joining us and welcome you to the podium at Brookings.

(Applause)

SENATOR BIDEN: Thank you, Mister Ambassador. Quite frankly, you summarized my speech. Ladies and gentlemen, I want to begin by thanking Brookings for offering me this forum once again and to make it available. I have been grateful for the many opportunities to be able to speak to important issues from this platform and I appreciate you giving me this opportunity again. Thank you very much.

To state the obvious, ladies and gentlemen, this is a time of tremendous challenge for America and the world. We must contend with an ongoing war in Afghanistan, genocide in Darfur, the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea, the rise of China, and the reemergence of Russia, the growing insecurity of our energy supply, the fragility of our climate, and the threat posed

by radical fundamentalism. But there is one issue that dominates our national debate today, and it is Iraq.

If we deal with Iraq successfully, we can recover the freedom, the flexibility, and the credibility to meet more aptly these other challenges that I have just mentioned. That is what I want to talk to you about today, Iraq.

Listen to the debate about Iraq here in Washington. It centers in my view on a false choice that is also a bad choice. We either continue on President Bush's failing course and hand off Iraq to the next president, or what we do is we just leave and we hope for the best. I believe there is a better choice. I believe it is still possible to bring our troops home without having traded a dictator for chaos, a chaos that engulfs Iraq and quite possibly spreads to the Middle East. Ladies and gentlemen, this must be our goal, leaving Iraq without leaving behind chaos. Leaving Iraq is necessary, but it is not a plan.

We also need a plan for what we are going to leave behind. Nine months ago with Less Gelb of the Council on Foreign Relations, I proposed a plan. I will not take the time to go into great detail today, but go on my website PlanforIraq.com and you will get all the detail that you need. Essentially our plan recognizes that there is no purely military exit from Iraq. Instead, we set out a roadmap to a political settlement in Iraq and one that gives the warring factions a way to share power and offers us the chance to leave with our interests intact. The plan has five major pieces.

First, maintaining a uniformed Iraq by decentralizing Iraq, giving the Kurds, the Shiites, and the Sunnis breathing room in their own regions as, I might add, the Iraqi Constitution calls for. The central government would be responsible for common concerns like guarding the border, currency, and the distribution of oil revenues.

Second, secure support from the Sunnis who have no oil and no obvious natural resources by guaranteeing them a fair share of the oil revenues, and allow former Baathist Party members to go back to work to reintegrate Sunnis with no blood on their hands back into the system.

Third, increase economic assistance to Iraq, not diminish it, and economic assistance to its regions. Insist that the oil-rich Gulf States put up most of the money. Tie it to the protection of minority rights and create major job programs to deny new militia recruits. As General Chiarelli said to me when I made my last trip to Iraq, "Do you want me to deal with the rise of militias? Provide jobs. I will take care of the militias."

Fourth, initiate a major diplomatic offensive to enlist the support of Iraq's neighbors. Create an oversight group with the United Nations and the major powers to enforce their commitments to whatever political settlement is arrived at. Ladies and gentlemen, these countries have a profound stake in preventing chaos in Iraq, and they have the credibility that we lack to press for compromises by all Iraqis. If a political settlement fails to take hold in Iraq, these countries are vital to any strategy to contain that chaos within Iraq.

Fifth, instruct our military to draw up plans for withdrawing U.S. combat forces by 2008, leaving behind a small force to take care of dealing with jihadis who may congregate, and to train Iraqi forces, for that is the best way to focus Iraq's leaders on the political compromises they are going to have to make, is to make clear to them that we are going to be leaving.

Many of you heard me discuss this plan before. What is new I would argue is the growing support it is receiving. That support was evident during the 4 weeks of hearings we just held in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the month of January and into this month. It is evident in the new National Intelligence Estimate for Iraq, a consensus of the report of all U.S. intelligence agencies. The NIE and virtually all our witnesses agreed that the fundamental problem in Iraq is self-sustaining sectarian violence. Yes, jihadis, Baathists, criminal gangs, intra-sect violence, all contribute to the growing chaos, but Sunnis killing Shia and Shia killing Sunnis is the heart of the matter and that is what we have to stop or we have to come up with a plan to stop if we want to leave Iraq with our interests intact.

The question is, how do we stop the sectarian cycle of revenge? If history is any guide, we have to wait until one side wins or both sides exhaust themselves. That could take years of bloodletting, yes, I would posit, that we do not have. History also suggests it is possible to short-circuit sectarian strife. A decade ago Bosnia was being torn apart by ethnic cleansing which threatened to engulf the entire Balkans. The United States stepped in with the Dayton Accords

which kept the country whole by paradoxically dividing it into ethnic federations, Muslims, Croats, and Serbs, each retaining separate armies and separate presidents. Since then Bosnians have lived in a decade of peace, we have had thousands of troops none of whom thank God have been killed as a consequence of enemy fire, and now in the Balkans they are slowly coming back together. There is much work to be done, but slowly coming back together.

I would argue that Iraq presents a similar possibility. Here is what the National Intelligence Estimate says that we need, and I quote, "Broader Sunni acceptance of the current political structure and federalism, and significant concessions by Shia and Kurds to create space for Sunni acceptance of federalism." That is exactly what is behind the Biden-Gelb plan. That is the exact strategy.

During our hearings, witness after witness, including former Secretaries of State, foreign-policy experts including some from this institution, and elected officials came to a similar conclusion. So have a growing number of opinion makers.

What more and more people are beginning to recognize is that there are very few possible futures for Iraq in the near-term, and only one of them protects America's interests. Think about Iraq's possible futures. The Bush Administration has one vision, that Iraqis will rally behind a strong democratic central government that keeps the country together and protects the rights of all its citizens. But since the Samarra Mosque bombing, and I would argue since my

comment in 2002 that was referenced here, that vision has been cloudy to begin with and engulfed by flames of sectarian hatred since the Samarra Mosque bombing.

The hard truth in Iraq is that there is no trust within the government, no trust of the government by the people, and no capacity by the government to deliver services and security. And there is no evidence, I would argue, none, that we can build the trust and capacity of that government anytime soon.

But there are two other ways to govern Iraq from the center, a foreign occupation that the United States cannot sustain, or the return of a strongman who is not on the horizon, and even if he were, replacing one dictator with another would require a savagery to rival Saddam's worse excesses.

Where does that leave us? It leaves us in my view with an idea a large majority of Iraqis have already embraced and endorsed in their constitution and that our plan would help make a reality, federalism. Federalism would keep Iraq together by vesting power in the regions. It would bring decisions and responsibilities down to the local level, give Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds control over the fabric of their daily lives, security, education, marriage, jobs. Very few people, probably with the exception of some in this room, have actually read the Iraqi Constitution which I have with me. Very few people further still understand that legislation to implement its articles on federalism will take effect in Iraq within 15 months. They have already been voted by the Iraqi Parliament.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my assertion that federalism is Iraq's best possible future, but unless we make federalism work for all Iraqis, the violence will not stop. We have to convince the major powers and Iraq's neighbors that a federal Iraq is the best possible outcome for them as well and to put their weight and their influence behind such an outcome. Then together we have to bring the Sunnis in and convince the Shiites and Kurds to make real concessions. That is what the Biden-Gelb plan proposes. It demands a kind of sustained, hard-headed diplomacy for which this administration has shown little interest or aptitude, but it offers the possibility, not a guarantee, it offers the possibility of producing a soft landing in Iraq.

If we fail to make federalism work, there will be no political accommodation at the center in my view. Violent resistance will increase, and the sectarian cycle of revenue may very well spiral out of control and out of the country. At best, the result likely will be a violent breakup of Iraq into multiple failed states, at worst the result will be Iraq's total fragmentation into warring fiefdoms and the neighbors will not sit on the sidelines.

Already Iraq has aggravated deep Sunni-Shiite divides that run from Lebanon through Afghanistan, Pakistan through India. This fault line intersects with other cultural and political rifts between Arabs and Persians, Turks and Kurds, jihadis and the Muslim mainstream, to create conditions for a cataclysmic explosion at worst.

Iran and Arab states will back Shia and Sunni extremists as part of a proxy war, and eventually I believe they will intervene directly. Sunni jihadists could flood Iraq to confront the Persian-Shia threat, creating another haven for terror. Turkey could move into the north and crush the Kurdish ambitions, and Sunni-Shia tensions will rise from Beirut to Karachi. Individually these would be bad developments, together they would do terrible damage to America's interests in that part of the world.

It seems to me that we must lead a determined regional and international effort to end the Iraqi civil war and contain it if we cannot end the civil war. We must begin to make Iraq the world's problem, not merely our own, because it is the world's problem.

In my view, ladies and gentlemen, it is no surprise to you I believe the Bush Administration is heading in exactly the wrong direction. Instead of a diplomatic and political offensive to forge a political settlement, it proposes a military offensive that would send 17,500 American troops on the offensive in the middle of a city of 6,200,000 people in the midst of a vicious, vicious cycle of sectarian violence. This military surge is not a solution, it is a tragic mistake. If we are going to surge anywhere, we should be surging in Afghanistan. I was glad to hear the president this morning recognize what many of us have been saying for years, unless we surge troops, hardware, money, and a high level of attention into Afghanistan, it will fall back into the hands of the Taliban, terrorists, and drug lords which control a significant portion of it now.

I support the steps the president announced today, but I hope they are only the first steps, not the last, in the recommitment of the United States to the stability of Afghanistan, for if Afghanistan fails, the impact on Pakistan will be profound, and we do not have to wonder about whether or not they have significant radical elements of their society, nor do we have to wonder about whether or not they have weapons of mass destruction.

Ladies and gentlemen, the House is about to pronounce itself on the president's surge plan for Iraq, and the Senate will do so as well soon I hope. Some minimize the significance of nonbinding resolutions. They say it is meaningless. I would respectfully suggest if it is so meaningless, why did the White House and the president's political supporters mobilize so much energy against this nonbinding resolution? Opposing the surge I have said from the beginning is only the first step. We need a radical change in course of action in Iraq. If the president will not act to change, the Congress will have to attempt to do so, but Congress must act responsibly. We must resist this temptation to push for changes that sound good but may very well produce bad results.

The best next step in my view is to revisit the authorization Congress granted to the president in 2002 in the Use of Force Resolution for Iraq, and that is exactly what I am doing as we speak. We gave the president the power to destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, seek accommodation with the U.N. resolutions, and if necessary, to depose Saddam Hussein. The WMD were not there, they are not out of synch with U.N. resolutions, and Saddam Hussein is no

longer there. The 2002 authorization in my view is no longer relevant to the situation in Iraq.

So the legislation I am working on would repeal that authorization and replace it with a much narrower mission statement for our troops in Iraq. Congress should make clear what the mission of our troops is, to responsibly draw down while continuing to combat jihadis, train Iraqis, and respond to emergencies. We should make equally sure what the mission is not, to stay in Iraq indefinitely, and to get mired down in a savage civil war. Coupled with the Biden-Gelb plan, I believe a new resolution for the authorization of use of force is the most effective and responsible way to start to bring our troops home without leaving a mess behind.

I want to leave you with one thought. For our sake and the sake of the Iraqi people, we should be focused on how we get out of Iraq but with our interests intact. Everyone wants to bring our troops home. They want to bring them home as soon as safely as possible. But tempting as it is, we cannot just throw up our hands, blame the president for misusing the authority we gave him, and he did, and walk away without a plan for what we leave behind.

I will end where I began, leaving Iraq is a necessity, but it is not a plan. We need a plan for what we are going to leave behind. That is what I have offered. And to those who disagree, and it is reasonable to disagree with my plan, I have one simple question: What is your alternative? Thank you very, very much for listening, and I would be delighted to take questions.

MR. PASCUAL: Senator, thank you very much for putting these ideas on the table, both specifically for Iraq, but you even went beyond that talking about the dynamics of regional diplomacy and how important they are. You make a very compelling case which I obviously am sympathetic with from my opening comments about the need for a political agreement in Iraq, or the need for a political agreement in settling any kind of civil war.

As you have indicated, there is an emerging consensus about the nature of sectarian violence, there is an emerging consensus on the need for compromise, and I think you very rightfully said our experience has been in the past that in order to get to a political agreement you either get parties who get tired of killing each other, or there are some extraordinary events that finally bring us to that point.

That is the issue that I would like to bring us back to and get your additional thoughts on, on what a strategy can be to actually get to a political agreement. You have Iraqis killing one another; you have security forces within Iraq which are not dependable. For anybody who listened to NRP this morning and heard what was an extraordinary report on the role of the police there where you had the U.S. military saying that they had to actually stop the Iraqi police from participating in joint operations in order to actually give those a chance of success, indicative of the extent to which militias have infiltrated the police. So expecting the Iraqis to do this themselves is obviously limited.

Then the politics in the region are complicated. As you have indicated, there is a broader Sunni-Shia tension which is at play within Iraq but playing itself out more broadly in the region. Can you give us some thoughts about how you could see a political process developing that could help accelerate the chances for a political settlement taking hold?

SENATOR BIDEN: I think the art of diplomacy is trying to figure out what is in the interests of each of the people you are trying to get engaged. I do not think to use the phrase used by a former administration official, it is a slam-dunk, to assume that there are not common interests that we have with the Iranians, that the Iranians may very well have with the Turks, and that the region has with one another.

The fact of the matter is that I do not see a way in which we can actually get this kind of political movement underway absent an international pressure being brought upon the parties in the region who in turn are not so much able to influence events directly by telling their proxies in country do not do this or that, but letting their proxies know we are not going to be there for you if you continue to engage in the sectarian violence and not seek a political solution. That is the context in which I think this has to take place.

There are overwhelming interests on the part, for example, of the Saudis and the Sunni oil states. Their interest is do they decide now that this is going to be totally out of control and they are going to figure out how they

continue to pour materiel and maybe men and proxies in later? Or do they sign on to a system whereby they attempt to be part of a rebuilding program within Iraq? I will leave with this because we could talk about this the whole time, is it in the interests of the Iranians with their own internal divisions that exist to have 17 million Shia Arabs learning how to organize and shoot straight sitting on the border in a country where 70 percent of the country is not crazy about their own government in Tehran and where there are other divides? But the only way I think it can take place is if there is international pressure.

Were I president I would ask the United Nations Security Council and I ask the permanent five plus Germany to call for an international conference. I would bring in India and Indonesia; I would bring in possibly Pakistan and Egypt as well, to try to build a consensus of what kind of solution is mostly likely to be able to survive inside Iraq. That is the manner in which I would look at it. I am not sure I have answered your question, but that is the way I would look at it. It is almost in this case from the top down. To merely say we are leaving, get it straight, I do not think there is much hope.

MR. PASCUAL: I think that the point that is well taken and that comes out of your comments is that there is a need to involve the multilateral community, that there is the need for the U.N. to in fact bring others together to the table. It creates a dilemma for the United States because on one hand we have

to be in a leadership position, yet at the same time for us to be the one who is calling everyone together creates its own set of complications.

SENATOR BIDEN: It does, but it was not so complicated in Afghanistan. We did not have any trouble in the Six-Plus-Two Talks.

MR. PASCUAL: Right.

SENATOR BIDEN: We were able to do that. I find it interesting now that the president is now heralding, which I am delighted by the way, that it looks like he has stopped the erosion in North Korea, bringing us back to an agreement that is not even as good as the one that Clinton -- and heralding it as working because we have brought in six parties. I don't quite get it. Why does that rationale work with Korea and totally rejected by the administration as it relates to Iran and the region?

MR. PASCUAL: That is a good question. Let me raise another question which I live to regret if you ever ask me to testify for you again, you might not take kindly on me, but a different perspective on another part of the plan. You call for a plan for the withdrawal of troops by the end of 2008 assuming that you can get this kind of political agreement. Yet what we have also seen when we have had political agreements is that there has been a need for international forces to sustain them.

SENATOR BIDEN: Exactly.

MR. PASCUAL: In Bosnia, NATO was there for 9 years, another 2-1/2 years of the European force. We are going on 7-1/2 years in Kosovo. Is it really realistic to expect if there is a political agreement for U.S. forces to actually leave Iraq?

SENATOR BIDEN: If there is a political agreement that is embraced by the international community, I have no problem with America being part of that process. I could see, I could envision a circumstance where there is a political agreement, the sectarian violence has diminished significantly, and American troops are continuing to play a role in Iraq and mobilized in a way that accommodates that agreement. The reason to set the plan for being out by 2008 and have the military do that is to make it clear to the Iraqis there is no real prospect of us sticking around to participate in their civil war and act as, if you will, apartheid cops, act in a way that I sustain you in power when your very people want me out, and I sustain you in power and you in power because we keep it from totally imploding. That is the worst of all circumstances.

The reason for the military to set the goal is that it seriously will be moved toward, it will be clear that it will be implemented, that if a political settlement were to arise that would in fact be able to get the support as I would hope it would not only in Iraq but the region, I would were I President of the United States be prepared to have U.S. participation in that process.

MR. PASCUAL: I think that is a very important clarification and I think one that the general public probably has not come to recognize, because I we get the best-case scenario in Iraq which is probably a political settlement, then it cannot just be simply be assumed that that will implement itself, it is going to take a major commitment from the international community to make it viable.

SENATOR BIDEN: But we have to make it the world's problem, not just our problem.

MR. PASCUAL: I can monopolize this conversation for a while, but I will not, so I am going to turn to the audience for questions. Let me begin over here in the middle.

MR. JOSEPH: Good afternoon, Senator. Edward Joseph with Johns Hopkins and SAIS. Senator, I think your approach makes a lot of sense, indeed, together with Michael O'Hanlon here at Brookings.

SENATOR BIDEN: By the way, his testimony was brilliant. I do not want to embarrass him, but he was a star when he came up. You should have seen all 21 people listening to very word he had to say. The bad news for him is it means he gets invited back.

MR. JOSEPH: Very good. I am glad I mentioned Mike. He and I, as you know, have proposed a very similar version of the Bosnia model for Iraq. As you probably have, Senator, I have discussed the idea with opponents of it. You know that the Iraq Study Group dismissed it kind of out of hand. But if you

talk to these opponents, they have a few different objections. I am sure you know them. One is Iraq is too mixed. Another is Iraq is too fragmented political, they do not really want it, there is no Sunni counterpart to negotiate it with. There is paradoxically an argument that it is too unified, the Sunni and Shia are not really split. Finally, that there is really no capacity. If you think there is lack of capacity at the central government, just look at the regions, there is no capacity there so it cannot work.

Senator, again, agreeing very much with the thrust of your views, how do you approach these objections? Which do you believe is the most serious and most difficult to deal with?

SENATOR BIDEN: I think they are all real. Let's face it; there is not much capacity anywhere in Iraq at the moment. But it is a lot easier to control your neighborhood than it is control a nation. What I say to those who raise these issues, and I would ask this audience, anybody raise your hand if you think anytime in your lifetime you are going to see an Iraq National Police Force patrolling the streets of Fallujah. I am not being facetious. One man back there. God love him. Or woman. All I could see was the hand. She must be related to my mother who is a total optimist. But the fact of the matter is, most people do not see that happening. And by the way, she looked about 18, and so that is why in her lifetime it might work.

But all kidding aside, what is the alternative? It is easier to give people, which their constitution calls for -- I want to remind people, again, you have read it, you know it, the Constitution of Iraq says, Article 1, "The Republic of Iraq is one federal independent fully integrated state with a system of government, republican representative, democratic, and a constitution guaranteed for Iraq." Then it goes on to say what its authorities are. Then it says in Article 116, "This Constitution shall guarantee the region of Kurdistan as an existing region under federal authorities. Second, the Constitution shall provide for new regions to establish in accordance with the provisions." And then it goes on to say, "The regions shall adopt a Constitution." It lays out a whole detailed plan for regionalism. That is what they voted for.

When I ask some of the critics of the plan what we should do about this, they said basically tear it up. I find that fascinating. I find that now after 4 years the Constitution that we told the Iraqis we wanted them to come up with, that we, the United States, is going to essentially say tear it up and do it a different way.

The greatest criticism and the most accurate criticism, the most compelling criticism of the Biden-Gelb plan in my view has been there are a number of cities and regions where are extensively mixed communities, but what was predictable and what has already happened, 2 million people have fled those neighborhoods and left the country, and over 1 million are displaced persons

within Iraq. We saw the same thing in Tuzla, we saw it in Srebrenica, we saw it in Sarajevo, and so I think there is no other reasonable way to do it. We have to help build those institutions, and that is why the third part of the plan is economic assistance into those regions.

MR. PASCUAL: One of the things I would add to that, and I think it is an important complement to this, is to recognize that another part of the constitution says that the regions of Iraq will be responsible for legislation that governs the development of future energy resources.

SENATOR BIDEN: Right.

MR. PASCUAL: And it is one of the reasons why the Sunnis were so against this constitution, because it provides for regionalism but it gives them no control of resources.

SENATOR BIDEN: Exactly right.

MR. PASCUAL: In effect, the constitution for the Sunnis is a no-win situation, and why it is so critical in the proposal that you put forward that you get a political agreement now, that the constitution itself was not the political agreement, it is part of it, but you have to in fact inject something else into it.

SENATOR BIDEN: Exactly right. If you remember, our very ambassador very deftly roughly a week before the vote on that constitution took place got the Parliament to add two amendments to the constitution which essentially said and implied a promise on revisiting regionalism as well as

resources. I was there during that vote. The expectation was that there would eventually be a constitutionally amendment for the purpose of guaranteeing the distribution of oil. That was the implied promise. That was not even printed in the constitution but guaranteed verbally as people went to vote.

MR. PASCUAL: Steve?

MR. CLEMENS: Thank you, Carlos, and thank you, Senator Biden. I am Steve Clemens of the New America Foundation. It seems impossible to talk about Iraq any longer without also talking about Iran. You talked about diplomacy talking account of other stakeholders' interests, and I am interested in two parts of this. What do you think Iran's appetite and interests are in the region? And I am sure you have read about this alleged offer by Iran in May 2003 to propose a round of comprehensive negotiations. If you had been president, how might you have responded to such a proposal and what do you think about that proposal?

SENATOR BIDEN: John Kennedy once said that America should never negotiate out of fear but never fear to negotiate. The idea that we have pushed the mute button over the last 6 years in our foreign policy has had disastrous ramifications and consequences for us, not the least of which is that within Iran, our greatest ally, the Iranian people who are dissatisfied with their government and if the Pew Foundation numbers are correct, other than Israel, we are more popular in Iran than any place from the Mediterranean to the Himalayas.

So us refusing to engage at all if for no other reason than not to be outgamed by the Iranian government is a serious mistake. I would talk, number one. Call for that 4 years ago, call for that and not only in Iran, but in Korean 4 years ago, and not just me, Dick Lugar, Chuck Hagel. It is not a partisan deal.

Secondly, I think Iran is somewhat schizophrenic about what their ambitions are. I think it depends on who within Iran you are talking to. I think for the Iranian people, there is an ambition that they be recognized as a major force and source of energy, power, and influence in the region. For Ahmadinejad I think there is a desire to seek some hegemony in the region. And I think the same probably exists in the different iteration with the ayatollahs and with the theocracy. But it does not mean that we can't be smart enough to figure out how to have our ends realized by using their divisions as well as their interests for our self-interests. So the failure to talk I think is a serious mistake.

MR. PASCUAL: In the back?

MR. WALLACE: David Wallace with -- Public Relations.

Senator, I believe I heard you said in your speech that under the worst-case scenario Iran may become directly involved in the insurgency in Iraq. The president yesterday asserted that that has already happened or some entities in Iran are supplying weapons to insurgents in Iran. Do you dispute the president's accusation that these weapons are being supplied? And as a general question, what is the president's credibility level with the Democrats in the Senate?

SENATOR BIDEN: I will refrain from answering the last part of the question. I think his credibility with the Democrats is similar to what it is with the American people. I think it is very low on these matters, and I think that is a fact. I don't think that that is a political statement; I think that is a fact, number one.

Number two, there is a difference between being involved and being involved. One of the things that I wonder about is I have been in Iraq seven times. My last three times in Iraq, the most recent one being the Fourth of July, I was informed of these shape charges back then. I was informed of them if memory serves me 2 years ago. They existed, and we were told they were coming across the border from Iran. In my briefings in Fallujah, my briefings down in Basra I was told exactly that. What has changed? What has changed is there are more of them and they are doing more damage. That is a bad thing.

Secondly, if you look at the Quds Force, I am little confused as Hakim comes and visits the president, we a month later arrest the number two guy in that force in Hakim's compound and we release him. What is the story here? What is going on? I don't quite get it. If we knew this 2 years ago, we knew we had a high-level member of that force arrested in the compound of the guy the president just met with with whom we are going to work out a new political deal among the Shia, why did we not keep him to question him? Why did we not find out more? Why did we release him? There is a lot we do not know.

The distinction I would make between the Iranian government directly, Iranian forces directly not with the approval of the government, supplying a device that can penetrate our armor and sending large numbers of forces into Iraq are fundamentally different. They are fundamentally different than if this breaks out into full-blown chaos. What will the Iraqis if the Kurds in the north having such a large Kurdish population? Not the Iraqis, the Iranians. What will the Turks do? It is a magnitude of difference.

MR. PASCUAL: It is an awful thing any time that there is an injection of weapons or external involvement in a situation that could put American troops at risk. So in that sense if there are weapons from Iran that are threatening American troops, obviously we should be concerned. But the reality is that the majority of American military and Iraqi civilians who have been killed in Iraq have actually been killed as a result of Sunni attacks.

SENATOR BIDEN: Right.

MR. PASCUAL: Do we have a sense of how those Sunni insurgents are being supplied, how much of it is just from a remnant of the Saddam area and the weapons that they were able to grab, or whether there is funding and resources coming in from other parts of the Arab world? Is this an issue that you could take up further in your hearings as you continue?

SENATOR BIDEN: The answer is yes, we have been briefed on that. Some I can speak to, some I cannot. I will not be violating anything other

than what you have already read in the newspaper by saying that clearly the Sunnis are getting support not only from the 800,000 tons of weapons depots we did not guard, I might add. On this platform 5 years ago I pointed out we did not have the forces to guard those depots which are being raided, and we identified them.

In addition to that, there is no question there is outside aid coming financially and militarily to the Sunnis from different sources than Iran. Look, ladies and gentlemen, there is one of three things you can do to deal with these shape charges. One of them is you can find the supplier, seek it out and destroy it which is a difficult thing to do. Two, you can conclude that it is coming from another country and decide that is a basis to go to war, and if you decide to do that, you had better come to the United States Congress and lay out your case because you have no authority to do that without the authority of the United States Congress to wage a war against another country.

Three, you can decide that one of the ways to end the involvement not only of the Iranians in whatever form and the Sunnis out of the country is you do what I am suggesting, you bring about an international conference to get to the issue of what interests are able to be accommodated in each of the parties that are common that can prevent this from going on. That to me is the most rational way to proceed.

MR. PASCUAL: We are going to have to send you back to vote in a couple of minutes. We have time for two more questions.

SENATOR BIDEN: I'll try to answer yes or no if I can do it.

MR. MITCHELL: Gary Mitchell from The Mitchell Report. I want to ask you a question not about Iraq per se, but a political question that has to do with your candidacy and its relationship to this proposal that you put out today. I have not heard you talk about this, so I am going to try to make the question pretty simple. That is, whether on your way to deciding to become an announced president candidate you gave thought to whether or not there was any reason to consider stepping aside as chairman of this major committee, whether there was any potential conflict there. And taking that a step further, as the campaign season rolls along and if you were to emerge as one of the leading candidates whether that is a question you have thought about, and if you have, I would be interested in your thinking and what decision you came to.

SENATOR BIDEN: No, and no.

MR. PASCUAL: That was quick. Final question?

MR. HILLIARD: Good afternoon, Senator.

MRSENATOR BIDEN: Good afternoon.

MR. HILLIARD: My name is Christopher Hilliard and I am a student at the University of Pennsylvania and an intern here at Brookings. You have put forward a very interesting suggestion about what Congress could

potentially do to influence military policy. My question is a bit more broad. It is, how much influence do you feel Congress has over military policy? And what role do you believe is appropriate for Congress to play in influencing military policy?

SENATOR BIDEN: I suffer from teaching constitution law at Widener University for the past 13 or 14 years, and I teach separation of powers, and that is one of the issues. So I am going to resist acting professorial and giving you a real answer to that and suggest the following, that it is possible but difficult for the United States Congress to lay out a foreign policy. It is possible but a little less difficult to lay out a military strategy that can succeed. Usually the Congress is left with only blunt instruments, the blunt instrument of cutting off funding, and the blunt instrument of attempting to cap the number of troops or only specify where money can go relative to what troops. And from my experience here back to the Vietnam era, that is a very dicey, difficult, troublesome, and not at all an ennobling experience that unites people very well.

But I do believe there is one thing the Congress can do that would avoid the race to tactical alternatives and allow the possibility of a strategic solution, and that is to change the basis upon which the president has authority to use force, as opposed to suggesting that he can use X number of forces here, Y number of forces there. To vastly oversimplify it, one of the things that the Founders worried about and the reason why we came up with the clause of

commander-in-chief was the generic agreement reached at the time was that it is not the role of the president to decide whether to move from a state of peace to a state of war. That is a decision for the people through the Congress. But in actually moving forces on a battlefield, they have Valley Forge in mind, they had the Continental Congress sitting in Philadelphia micromanaging when Washington could and could not move and realized that was not a good idea.

So at either ends of the spectrum here there are limitations on both the president and the Congress. But what is not a limitation in my view is to be able to set out more clearly and directly the parameters that the president is act within.

I respectfully suggest if the Biden-Lugar Resolution authorizing use of force had been the one that pertained in this situation, it would have been very much more difficult for the president to make the tragic mistakes and the premature actions he took when he took it under the resolution that was offered. It is a lesson I have learned about counting on the confidence of a president or an administration to implement a strategy that is complicated that will engulf a nation, potentially engulf a nation, and has very long, long lead times in order to be solved.

I will end again where I began. One of the things that was absolutely clear to me from the beginning of this debate was that this would be an incredibly expensive, protracted, difficult conflict once we crossed the line of

invading. It was about a generation, a decade, all the discussion in that brief moment when I was Chairman back then of the Foreign Relations Committee, all the discussion in the press was and among many people was the day after Saddam. It was not an accident that Senator Lugar and I wrote a detailed report entitled "The Decade After."

To pretend that this was not knowable, the phrase most often used by the administration's spokesperson I found preposterous then, I find preposterous now. The outlines and the depth of the difficulty were clearly knowable. The detail of all of it was not, but the broad outlines of needing hundreds of thousands of troops and hundreds of billions of dollars, tens of thousands of troops committed for 5 to 10 years, the likelihood of sectarian violence, the probability of not being greeted with open arms, the lack of an infrastructure and bureaucracy to build a nation upon, were all knowable, and I would add settable, there is no such word, but having been said by not just me, many of you in this room and many others.

So the quickest way theoretically, we will find out, to be able to constrain responsibly a policy that is continuing to go array is to redefine what authority the president had in terms of objectives as opposed to attempting to redefine what he can do specifically with 132,500 troops versus 144,000. All of those things sound great and the public loves them, and I understand because the public is angry and frustrated. But ladies and gentlemen, they are smarter than

you give them credit for. If you notice, they think this is a tragic policy, but very few of them are saying bring every troop home tomorrow. That is what their heart says, that is what my heart says, that is what I suspect your heart says, but they are much more sophisticated than you think they are. They know there are consequences for this failure. And as every one of you who have testified before our committee said, there are no good answers left, there are no good answers.

But to think we can have an answer that we can live with that does not engage hard-headed diplomacy based around a specific objective that provides a political solution in internally, I think is hopeless. It may be, God forbid, as my grandfather would say, God willing and the creek not rising, if I am here a year from now sitting before you, you may hear Joe Biden saying we have to withdraw and contain, there may be no option. But as of the moment, there is still an option, but not the one the president is pursuing. Thank you very, very much.

(Applause)

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