

Americans Are Finally Waking Up to the Failure of U.S. Policy in Iraq

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Although the American people slept through the facile national debate about whether the Bush administration should invade Iraq and the post-invasion unraveling of justifications for doing so, the public is finally waking up to the nightmare of U.S. policy in Iraq. And their representatives in Congress, many of whom were previously hiding in the bushes, are now beginning to get the courage to finally speak out.

A recent New York Times poll shows how low support for the Bush administration's adventure in Iraq has sunk. Sixty percent of the American public thinks that the U.S. effort to bring stability to Iraq is going badly, fifty-nine percent disapprove of the way President Bush is handling the situation, and 51 percent now believe that the United States should have stayed out of Iraq in the first place. All of these measures of support for the war effort have gradually deteriorated over time and can be expected to decline further as the carnage continues.

This erosion of support has emboldened some thinking members of Congress to propose a resolution calling for the president to begin withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq by October 1, 2006. The sponsors of the resolution come from across the political spectrum, including a liberal, a moderate, a conservative, and a libertarian. Although the resolution does not specify a date for the completion of the draw down, it is a long overdue exercise of Congress's underused constitutional role of determining whether, when, and where U.S. forces are in harm's way around the world. The last time Congress flexed its muscles and ended an unnecessary Executive Branch-initiated quagmire was the termination of funding for the Vietnam War. Since then, a cowed Congress has blindly gone along with many ill-advised presidential brushfire wars.

Representative Walter B. Jones (R-NC), a conservative, Ron Paul (R-TX), a libertarian, Neil Abercrombie (D-HI), a moderate, and Dennis Kucinich (D-OH), a liberal, are laudably attempting to reinstate the Founders' original conception of a substantial congressional role in foreign policy. Jones's support for the bill is most significant because he is a conservative who sits on the House Armed Services Committee, represents Camp Lejeune Marine base, and originally voted for the war.

Similarly, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), the House Minority Leader, unsuccessfully attempted to introduce a measure that would require the administration to give Congress criteria for determining when U.S. troops could be pulled out of Iraq. More and stronger congressional actions to end the war will arise as popular support for the war continues to erode.

Such congressional opposition to presidential meddling in brushfire wars of choice is sporadic and often delayed. Initially, in any military action, the public usually gives the president the benefit of the doubt and members of Congress, even if they think the foreign intervention is unneeded or harebrained, are scared of being labeled "unpatriotic" if they

oppose war. But if the United States begins to lose the conflict or is perceived to be doing so, takes too long to win, or experiences too many casualties, the war can quickly become unpopular—as it has in Iraq. Democracies that fight wars that are not critical to their security are always at a disadvantage. Guerrilla movements only need to keep an army in the field and wait until public opinion in the invading country turns against the war. In other words, if the guerrillas don't lose, they have a good chance of winning.

The Iraqi guerrillas have ample evidence that the American public will eventually react to mounting casualties and elusive victory. In the last three or so decades, the United States not only withdrew from Vietnam, but also left Somalia and Lebanon because of public disapproval of excessive casualties in faraway wars.

The Bush administration is pinning all its hopes in Iraq on eventual Sunni participation in the political process and the quick establishment of competent Iraqi security forces. But the Sunni Arab guerrillas will be better off if the United States leaves. They have few incentives to throw down their arms and join a political process that does not guarantee that a U.S.-backed Shi'ite-Kurd government will refrain from paybacks for the abuses of Saddam Hussein's Sunni regime. Also, the Iraqi security forces desperately need to be fully capable before the American public inevitably loses patience with the war. Using existing local security services to quash a rebellion is hard enough, but the Bush administration is now trying to reconstitute security forces it disbanded after the initial invasion, while the insurgents are targeting the recruits. Many experts agree that years will be required to make those forces fully functional.

The American people and their congressional representatives are unlikely to wait that long. The administration should at least be honest with itself, if not the public, and realize that the war has been lost. It should follow the proposal of the aforementioned bipartisan congressional group, setting a schedule for withdrawal, and begin negotiations with all Iraqi groups—including the Sunni guerrillas—for a comprehensive peace settlement.

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