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Iraq is No Closer to National Reconciliation Than Before the Surge Began

The Iraq War is Exhausting Our Nation

By Sen. RUSSELL FEINGOLD

The amendment I am offering with Majority Leader Reid and Senators Leahy, Dodd, Boxer, Kennedy, Kerry, Harkin, Whitehouse, Wyden, Durbin, Schumer, Obama, Menendez, Lautenberg, Brown and Sanders to H.R. 2764, the fiscal year 2008 omnibus appropriations bill is one I have offered before and I will not hesitate, if I must, to offer again and again and again. I'd add that the 17 cosponsors is the greatest number we've ever had for this amendment. It requires the President to begin safely redeploying U.S. troops from Iraq within 90 days of enactment, and requires redeployment to be completed within 9 months. At that point, with our the bulk of our troops safely out of Iraq, funding for the war would be ended, with four narrow exceptions: providing security for U.S. government personnel and infrastructure; training the Iraqi Security Forces; providing training and equipment to U.S. servicemen and women to ensure their safety and security; and conducting targeted operations, limited in duration and scope, against members of al Qaeda and other affiliated international terrorist organizations.

Some of my colleagues complain that we have spent too much time debating Iraq this year. They'd rather be talking about issues. Well, we have a lot of important priorities here, but nothing is more important to me or my constituents than ending this disastrous war. As I do every year, I held a townhall meeting in every county in Wisconsin this year. That's 72 meetings, for those of you who aren't from the Badger state. I heard a lot from my constituents at these meetings about health care and education. But the number one issue I heard about was foreign affairs, particularly the war in Iraq. Let me tell you, they weren't asking why Congress is spending so much time on this issue. They weren't asking us to give the President more time for his so-called surge. Like Americans all across the country, they want an end to this war and they want to know what's stopping us.

The Senate needs to address the concerns and demands of our constituents, who more than a year ago voted for a change in congressional leadership in large measure because of the debacle in Iraq. But we have yet to follow through and end this misguided war, before more Americans are injured and killed. And we are about to adjourn for the year and let the war drag on even longer.

We hear a lot from supporters of the President that violence in Iraq is down right now, and therefore we are on the path to victory. That argument would be a lot more convincing if the administration had a viable strategy for success. The surge may buy time, but as long as there is no political solution to Iraq's problems, we are just postponing the inevitable resurgence in violence and our brave troops will continue bearing the brunt of it.

That's not a strategy for success. It's not even a strategy it's a way of pushing this problem off to the next president, and the next Congress, while our troops put their lives on the line and our constituents foot the bill. Or, I should say, our constituents' children and grandchildren foot the bill, because we can't even be bothered to figure out a way to pay for the war. We're just handing the tab to future generations, sticking them with hundreds of billions of dollars of more deficit spending.

I am certainly pleased that violence in Iraq has declined in the last few months. Once again, our troops have showed they excel in any challenge with which they are tasked. This doesn't change the fact, however that this year was the bloodiest year for Americans since the war began and there are still a few weeks to go in 2007.

Indeed, let us remember that nearly 4,000 Americans have died and almost 30,000 have been wounded in a war that has no clear strategy and no end in sight. While the President is bringing home a token number of troops, over 160,000 remain as the war drags on into its fifth year. What are we supposed to tell them, and their families to wait another year until a new administration and new Congress finally listen to the American people and bring this tragedy to a close?

Iraq appears to be no closer to legitimate political reconciliation at the national level than it was before the surge began. Equally worrisome is that, as part of the President's plan, we appear to be deepening our dependence upon former insurgents and militia-infiltrated security forces with questionable loyalties. Supporting the sheiks in al Anbar and elsewhere may help to reduce violence in the near term, but by supporting both sides of a civil war, we are risking greater violence down the road. Such tactics are likely to undermine the prospects for long-term stability as they could lead to greater political fragmentation and ultimately jeopardize Iraq's territorial integrity. Again without legitimate national reconciliation, violence may ebb and flow, but it won't end and we'll be no closer to a settlement no matter how long we keep a significant military presence in Iraq. That's not the fault of our heroic men and women in uniform it's the fault of the administration's disastrous policies.

There's another dirty secret behind the temporary drop in violence, and it relates to the segregation of Baghdad, and the neighborhoods on its outskirts. With so many Iraqis fleeing their homes in search of greater safety and security, large scale displacement has resulted in very different demographics. Previously mixed neighborhoods have ceased to exist, thereby curtailing one of the chief sources of sectarian violence. This ethnic cleansing is hardly evidence of a successful surge. And it sure isn't a hopeful sign for future peace and stability in Iraq.

When it announced the surge, the administration said its goal was to keep a lid on violence to give time and space for reconciliation in Iraq. Now that we are no closer to reconciliation, the administration is trying, once again, to move the goal posts. We don't hear as much about reconciliation now, and when we do, it sounds very different from the national reconciliation that was supposedly our goal instead we hear about "bottom-up" reconciliation, whatever that means. All the administration can do is stall for time, just as it did in 2004, just as it did in 2005, just as it did in 2006. The slogan may be different "Mission Accomplished," "Stay the Course," "The New Way Forward" and even "Return on Success" but each time we are told we are on the right road, if we just keep walking a little longer. Until, that is, we reach another dead end, and a new slogan is invented to justify heading in a new, but equally futile, direction.

As the Administration blunders from one mistake to another, brave American troops are being injured and killed in Iraq, our military is being over-stretched, countless billions of dollars are being spent, the American people are growing more and more frustrated and outraged, and our national security is being undermined. Instead of focusing on Iraq, we should be focusing on our top national security priority, and that of course is going after al Qaeda and its affiliates around the globe. This administration has sadly proven that we cannot do both.

Al Qaeda is waging a global campaign, from North Africa -- where the Algerian government has blamed an al Qaeda affiliate for two major bombings last week -- to the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan where, while we have been distracted by Iraq, Al Qaeda has reconstituted and strengthened itself. There is a price to pay for our neglect, Mr. President, and this administration has failed to acknowledge it.

Because of its narrow focus on Iraq, the administration has been so distracted it has not adequately addressed the deteriorating security conditions in Afghanistan, where the resurgent Taliban the same movement that harbored and supported the terrorist elements that attacked our country on 9/11 are gaining ground. Violence may be down in Iraq, Mr. President, but it is up significantly in Afghanistan. There were 77 suicide attacks in Afghanistan in just the first six months of 2007, which is about twice the number for the same period in 2006 and 26 times higher than from January to June 2005.

Now this worrisome escalation of suicide bombings is one of many signs that Afghanistan's already tenuous stability is even shakier. And while earlier this week, the Pentagon confirmed that the US military and its NATO partners are reviewing plans for Afghanistan, it's awfully late in the game to try to put that country on a solid path to stabilization and development. Nonetheless, we have to try because we still have an opportunity to really finish the job we started six years ago in Afghanistan eliminating the Taliban and destroying a safe haven for terrorist networks that seek to harm us. And this opportunity is critical because until Bin Laden and his reconstituted al Qaeda leadership are killed or captured, Afghanistan's future can not be separated from our own national security.

So instead of seeing the big picture instead of approaching Iraq in the context of a comprehensive and global campaign against a ruthless enemy this administration persists with its tragic policy and its tragic mistakes. As the President digs in his heels, he is simultaneously deepening instability throughout the Middle East, undermining the international support and cooperation we need to defeat al Qaeda,

providing al Qaeda and its allies with a rallying cry and recruiting tool, and increasing our own vulnerability.

The President's promise to redeploy a few battalions, while leaving 160,000 troops in Iraq, is not nearly enough. That is why, once again, I am offering this amendment with Majority Leader Reid. It is up to us here in Congress to reverse what continues to be an intractable policy. It is our job to listen to the American people, to save American lives, and to protect our nation's security by redeploying our troops from Iraq because the President will not do it.

I am not suggesting that we abandon the people of Iraq, or that we ignore the political impasse there. We can not ignore the ongoing humanitarian crisis that has unfolded within Iraq or the one that followed millions of Iraqis as they fled to Jordan and Syria. These issues do require the attention and constructive engagement of U.S. policymakers, key regional players, and the international community. They require high-level, consistent, and multi-lateral engagement and cooperation. But Iraqi reconciliation can not and will not be brought about by a massive American military engagement.

By enacting Feingold-Reid, we can finally bring our troops out of Iraq and focus on what should be our top national security priority waging a global campaign against al Qaeda and its affiliates.

Now some of my colleagues will oppose this amendment. That is their right. But I hope none of them will suggest that Feingold-Reid would hurt the troops by denying them equipment or support. Because there is no truth to that argument none. Passing this legislation would result in our troops being safely redeployed within 9 months. At that point at that point with the troops safely out of Iraq, funding for the war would end, with the narrow exceptions I mentioned earlier. That is what Congress did in 1993 when it voted overwhelmingly to bring our military mission in Somalia to an end. And that is what Congress must do again to terminate the President's unending mission in Iraq.

This amendment is almost identical to the version I offered with Senator Reid and others to the Defense Department authorization bill. And once again, we have specified that nothing in this amendment will prevent U.S. troops from receiving the training or equipment they need "to ensure, maintain, or improve their safety and security." So I hope we won't be hearing any more spurious arguments about troops on the battlefield not getting the supplies they need.

This war is exhausting our country, over-stretching our military, and tarnishing our credibility. Even with the recent decline in violence, the American people know the war is wrong and they continue to call for its end. So I urge my colleagues to vote yes on Feingold-Reid so we can finally heed their call to action.

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