Getting Out of Iraq

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On John Murtha's Position

There is much of which to approve in the recent speech of Rep. John P. Murtha, Democrat of Pennsylvania, on Iraq (available on his website). The hawkish Murtha had been critical of the Bush administration's handling of the war for some time, but until now his solution had been to call for more troops. On November 17, however, he recognized courageously that U.S. troops "can not accomplish anything further in Iraq militarily. IT IS TIME TO BRING THEM HOME."

Murtha pointed out, as the anti-war movement has been pointing out all along, that the U.S. troops in Iraq, rather than adding to stability, "have become a catalyst for violence." He referred to the acknowledgement made by General George W. Casey, commander of the "multinational force" in Iraq, during a hearing before the Armed Services Committee of the U.S. Senate in September 2005, that the presence of "the coalition forces as an occupying force" is "one of the elements that fuels the insurgency."

Murtha pointed out that a recent poll indicated that 80 percent of Iraqis want the U.S. out. This poll, a secret British defense ministry survey conducted in August 2005, is consistent with earlier polls and several facts: the fact that most slates in the January 2005 election — including the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which won the election — had in their platform the demand for a timetable for the withdrawal of occupation forces from Iraq; a U.S. military poll in February that found only 23 percent of urban residents supported the presence of coalition troops, compared to 71 percent opposed; the statement of 126 members of the Iraqi National Assembly, including a majority of the 140 MPs of the majority UIA, demanding "the departure of the occupation force"; and the request made repeatedly by the National Sovereignty Committee of the Iraq National Assembly for a withdrawal timetable for "occupation troops.

There is no guarantee of what would happen in the event of a U.S. withdrawal, but Murtha noted — as the anti-war movement has argued since the beginning of the occupation — that the U.S. presence makes an agreement between contending Iraqi forces and the peaceful unfolding of the political process more difficult. For example, the Association of Muslim Scholars, the most prominent Sunni organization with ties to the armed resistance, has repeatedly declared that it would call for a cessation of all armed action if the U.S. and its allies set a timetable for their withdrawal.

Murtha has submitted a resolution to the House (H.J. Res. 73, Nov. 17) calling for the redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq. That Murtha, a decorated Vietnam combat veteran and one of the most prominent boosters of the military in the Congress, has had it with the war is a telling sign of how badly things are going for the warmongers, and the more representatives who join the 13 co-sponsors of his resolution, the better. Furthermore, one has to sympathize with Murtha, of course, for the abuse that has been heaped upon him by the Bush administration and rightwing ideologues in Congress and the media.

Nevertheless, the anti-war movement needs to be careful not to confuse Murtha's position with its own.

When Murtha says "redeploy" — instead of withdraw — the troops from Iraq, he makes clear that — despite his rhetoric — he doesn't want to really bring them home, but to station them in the Middle East. As he told Anderson Cooper of CNN on November 18:

> "We ... have united the Iraqis against us. And so I'm convinced, once we redeploy to Kuwait or to the surrounding area, that it will be much safer. They won't be able to unify against the United States. And then, if we have to go back in, we can go back in."

Moreover, Murtha's resolution calls for the U.S. to create "a quick-reaction U.S. force and an over-the-horizon presence of U.S. Marines" to be "deployed to the region."

We strongly disagree. The anti-war movement cannot endorse U.S. military intervention in the Middle East, whether over or under the horizon. We don't want U.S. troops remaining in the region and poised to go back into Iraq. They don't belong there, period. Some — though not Murtha — suggest keeping U.S. bases within Iraq, close to the oil fields or in Kurdistan, in order to intervene more or less on the pattern of what U.S. forces are doing in Afghanistan. But this is a recipe for disaster, since the Iraqi view that the United States intends a permanent occupation is one of the main causes inciting the insurgency. Moreover, stationing U.S. forces in Kurdistan could only deepen the already dangerous ethnic animosities among Iraqis. In any event, if U.S. troops continue to be used in Iraq — whether deployed from bases inside the country or from outside — they will inevitably continue to cause civilian casualties, further provoking violence. Having a U.S. interventionary force stationed in Kuwait or in a similar location will continue to inflame the opposition of Iraqis who will know their sovereignty is still subject to U.S. control. As for the impact of keeping U.S. forces anywhere else in the larger region, it should be recalled that their presence was the decisive factor leading to 9-11 and fuels "global terrorism" in the same way that the U.S. military presence in Iraq "fuels the insurgency" there.

Murtha, we need to keep in mind, is not opposed to U.S. imperial designs or U.S. militarism. He criticizes the Bush administration because its Iraq policies have led to cuts in the (non-Iraq) defense budget, threatening the U.S. ability to maintain "military dominance."

Murtha's resolution calls for redeploying U.S. troops from Iraq "at the earliest practicable date" — which is reasonable only if it means that the withdrawal should be started immediately and completed shortly after the December elections, with the exact details to be worked out with the elected Iraqi government. In his press conference, however, Murtha estimated it would take six months to carry out the "redeployment," which seems far longer than the "earliest practicable date." (Recall that U.S. troops were withdrawn from Vietnam in 60 days from the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty.) To set such a long time period for the evacuation of Iraq is all the more worrying given that the decision to withdraw the troops is not even being considered yet by the Bush administration or the bipartisan majority of the U.S. Congress.

Congressional Republicans, in a transparent ploy, offered a one-sentence resolution stating that the deployment of U.S. troops in Iraq be terminated immediately. Murtha called this "a ridiculous resolution" that no Democrat would support (Hardball with Chris Matthews, Nov. 18). In point of fact, the resolution was opposed by all of the pro-war Democrats and most of the anti-war Democrats, who (as the Republicans hoped) didn't want to be accused of "cutting and running." But actually the resolution wasn't ridiculous at all understood in the sense we have just explained.

The anti-war movement should and no doubt will relentlessly continue its fight for the immediate, total, and unconditional withdrawal of U.S. troops and their allies from Iraq and the whole region. Its central slogan "Troops Out Now" is more warranted each day and will keep gaining in urgency until victory over the warmongers is achieved.

Postscript:
"Strategic Redeployment" vs. "Out Now"

Whatever the limitations of Rep. Murtha's call to redeploy U.S. troops from Iraq that we have already emphasized, he went much too far for most Democrats or for the Bush administration. Nevertheless, there have been others who have urged the redeploying of some of the U.S. forces in Iraq.

In October, Lawrence Korb and Brian Katulis, writing for the Center for American Progress, a liberal organization headed by Clinton's former chief of staff John Podesta, issued a report calling for what they termed "strategic redeployment."

Like Murtha, Korb and Katulis (who served in the Reagan and Clinton administrations, respectively) make telling observations. For example, they note that:

> "most Iraqis do not want us there and they do not feel our presence makes them safer. One half says they support insurgent attacks on coalition forces and a majority says they feel less safe when foreign troops patrol their neighborhoods, according to polling of Iraqi citizens sponsored by the US government earlier this year."

They conclude, however, that what is needed is a "strategic redeployment," specifically rejecting "calls for an immediate and complete withdrawal." Under their proposal, during 2006, 46,000 national guard and reserves would be returned to the United States, 20,000 troops would be sent to other theaters (18,000 to Afghanistan, 1,000 to Southeast Asia, and 1,000 to Africa), and 14,000 troops would be stationed in Kuwait and off-shore in the Persian Gulf. The 60,000 U.S. troops remaining in Iraq would be redeployed away from urban areas to minimize inflaming Iraqi opinion. By the end of 2007, most of these troops would be withdrawn (to unspecified locations), leaving only "counterterrorist units."

> "This presence, along with the forces in Kuwait and at sea in the Persian Gulf area will be sufficient to conduct strikes coordinated with Iraqi forces against any terrorist camps and enclaves that may emerge and deal with any major external threats to Iraq."

Some analysts (for example, Slate's Fred Kaplan) have suggested that Murtha got his plan from Korb and Katulis, though he speeds up their timetable and moves his entire residual force out of Iraq. But the same reasons given in our original essay for why the anti-war movement should avoid confusing Murtha's position with its own apply with even greater force to the Korb-Katulis position. Korb and Katulis wisely point out that to enhance U.S. security President Bush should announce that the United States "will not build permanent military bases in Iraq, counteracting arguments made in recruitment pitches by militants and Iraqi insurgents." But where are the U.S. counterterrorist units in Iraq going to be housed if not at bases? In any event, it's not just designs on military bases that need to be disavowed, but plans to dominate Iraqi oil too, which are proceeding apace. And a two-year timetable is unacceptable. As we noted earlier, two to three months is plenty of time to remove all U.S. troops, if that is one's genuine interest. Protracted "timetables" make sense only if one is

trying to secure a continuing dominance over Iraqi politics and resources before leaving.

In the Washington Post of November 26, Joe Biden of Delaware, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and an aspiring presidential candidate, wrote an oped column entitled "Time for An Iraq Timetable." Biden declared that in 2006 U.S. troops

> "will begin to leave in large numbers. By the end of the year, we will have redeployed about 50,000. In 2007, a significant number of the remaining 100,000 will follow. A small force will stay behind — in Iraq or across the border — to strike at any concentration of terrorists."

Biden's language is interesting — he doesn't quite call for this, but essentially predicts it. His prediction seems to be based on the fact that the Senate by a vote of 79-19 and over the objections of the White House adopted an amendment requiring the President to provide quarterly reports on the progress of U.S. policy and military operations in Iraq. (This vote took place after the Senate defeated a Democratic-sponsored amendment asking the president to prepare an estimated timetable for withdrawal from Iraq.) Given that the successful amendment has no teeth at all, it's hard to see why it presages much of anything.

Nevertheless, Biden's comment is consistent with various hints from the Bush administration itself. Obviously the Republicans don't want to go into the 2006 elections, let alone the 2008 elections with an increasingly unpopular and seemingly endless occupation of Iraq on display. In part this leads them to make optimistic comments about how soon Washington will be able to reduce the number of troops in Iraq (glossing over the fact that several thousand troops were added before the October 15 referendum, so a withdrawal of these would indicate no progress at all). During the Vietnam War there were countless optimistic predictions of when the troops would come home, only to have the president send more troops when the situation deteriorated further. And we've been hearing similar optimistic comments from the Bush administration for more than two years; for example, on October 19, 2003, the Washington Post reported on its front page:

> "There are now 130,000 U.S. troops in Iraq. The plan to cut that number is well advanced.... and has been described in broad outline to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld but has not yet been approved by him. It would begin to draw down forces next spring, cutting the number of troops to fewer than 100,000 by next summer and then to 50,000 by mid-2005, officers involved in the planning said."

True, in 2003 Iraq was nowhere near the political liability for the Bush administration that it is now, so we shouldn't discount the prospect of a real policy shift. Clearly the Bush administration has scaled back its more grandiose goals in Iraq, but it's unlikely that it would choose to withdraw its forces without being confident that it could secure its more basic goal — domination of the oil resources of the region — unless, of course, this were made untenable. It is possible that the U.S. will fall back on a strategy of trying to replace its troops with air power, hoping that the reduction in U.S. casualties will make the war more palatable to the American public. In late August, the head of the air force told the New York Times that after any withdrawal of U.S. ground troops, "we will continue with a rotational presence of some type in that area more or less indefinitely," adding "We have interests in that part of the world...." To support these interests Washington is upgrading 16 different bases in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. According to Seymour Hersh in the Dec. 5

New Yorker, plans are being drawn up precisely to replace U.S. ground troops in Iraq with warplanes. Hersh reports that some Pentagon officials are worried about what it would mean to have Iraqis calling in bombing targets to the U.S. air force, but no matter who calls in the coordinates, white phosphorus, cluster munitions, and 500-pound bombs are not going to address the problem of the insurgency; indeed, they are going to generate more recruits for both the insurgency and terrorism.

For the anti-war movement, it is critical to insist on the complete withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces, from Iraq and from the region, because retaining any of them — whether counterinsurgency units ready to intervene or air power to level further Iraqi cities — will violate Iraqi sovereignty and continue to fuel insurgency and hatred. And the anti-war movement must insist as well on immediate withdrawal, because the Bush administration itself will soon be talking of future drawdowns — and indeed it already is.

We should bear in mind that the mere fact that the antiwar movement raises the "Out Now" slogan does not mean that U.S. forces are going to leave Iraq overnight. During the Vietnam War, a much more powerful movement than anything we have seen in the U.S. in the last few decades demanded that U.S. troops get "Out Now." This did not lead — even when the U.S. power elite reached the conclusion that the war should be terminated — to a "precipitous" withdrawal, but to a withdrawal that was completed only after the Paris Accords were concluded with the three main Vietnamese parties involved. Nevertheless, the pressure of the antiwar movement in the U.S. was decisive in compelling Washington to opt for this withdrawal.

The issue with "Out Now" is therefore not about the logistical details of withdrawal, but about how to be most effective in countering Washington's imperial aims. "Out Now" is a slogan around which one can build a large coalition of forces, from those who only care about "our boys" to those who care about the Iraqi people's freedom, whereas any dilution of the "responsible exit strategy" kind — aside from the fact that it would be extremely difficult even to agree on what the "conditions" for the withdrawal should be — would only provide the Bush administration, along with pro-war Democrats, an argument for justifying the protracted presence of U.S. troops.

We are not calling for a "cut and run" withdrawal, abandoning Iraq to its fate (like in the "selfish" nationalist rhetoric of the isolationist Right). We are perfectly aware that, given what the United States has been doing in Iraq, tragically disrupting the situation in that country, if the U.S. troops were just to leave Iraq suddenly, say in 48 hours, without prior notice, that would definitely create a dangerous chaotic situation. But this is not what we are demanding. The demand for the immediate withdrawal of the troops is, first of all, a demand for an immediate political decision to withdraw the troops. Once the political decision is taken and proclaimed publicly, it becomes possible, in fact indispensable, to prepare the best conditions for its implementation in the shortest possible timeframe, while starting without delay to bring troops back home. To be sure, the modalities through which this should be completed in a way not to harm the Iraqi people must be worked out with their elected representatives.

If Washington were to make clear that it wants to complete the withdrawal of its troops within a timetable stretching over weeks, or very few months, this would provide a very powerful incentive for the Iraqis to reach an agreement among themselves on a way to run their country together peacefully and start to concentrate their efforts on the huge task of its reconstruction. The consensus reached at the recent Cairo conference is an important step in that direction and proves that it is perfectly possible, and much easier indeed, to reach such agreements when U.S. representatives are not there constantly interfering and calling the shots.

Finally, those who accuse the antiwar movement of wanting to "cut and run" and pretend that they

care more for the interests of the Iraqis — whereas most of them are actually worried about U.S. imperial interests — would be better advised to demand that the U.S. respect Iraqi sovereignty over Iraqi natural resources and reconstruction. For our part, we believe that there is a moral obligation for the U.S. government to pay reparations to the Iraqi people for all that they have suffered as a consequence of U.S. criminal policies — from the deliberate destruction of Iraq's infrastructure in the 1991 war to the devastation brought by the present invasion and occupation, through the green light given to the Ba'athist regime to crush the mass insurrections of March 1991 and, above all, the murderous embargo inflicted on the Iraqi population from 1991 to 2003.

The withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces, the end of U.S. economic domination, and the payment of reparations: this is the way to truly serve the principles of justice, as well as the best interests of the people of both Iraq and the U.S.

— November 28, 2005

Footnotes