

Washington, D.C. - *The following op-ed appeared in the Raleigh News & Observer on Sunday, December 17th, 2006* :

The Iraq Study Group report moved past the semantic debate over whether Iraq is now in the midst of a civil war; the real question is how to address a rapidly deteriorating situation. The most valuable contribution of the report is that it looks at the situation comprehensively and suggests courses of action that acknowledge both what the United States can reasonably hope to accomplish and what it cannot.

The report specifically states, "there is no action the American military can take that, by itself, can bring about success in Iraq." Further, it suggests that the continuing, open-ended presence of U.S. troops may in fact be working against success, noting that, "if Iraqis continue to perceive Americans as representing an occupying force, the United States could become its own worst enemy."

Two messages are clear. First, U.S. troops must begin to come home. We should start an immediate, initial drawdown of American forces to signal that Iraqis must begin taking responsibility for their own nation and that we intend no continuing military presence. We must carefully formulate our remaining military mission, including our goals for training Iraqi Security Forces, responding to developing terrorist threats and preventing ethnic cleansing. A responsible exit strategy will not guarantee success, but it can help Iraqi leaders avoid the worst outcomes.

Second, the report makes clear that our exit strategy must draw on all tools in our diplomatic tool belt, formulating robust nonmilitary policies that will give Iraq the best chance for success as our troops depart. We should help strengthen Iraq's institutions of government and support reconstruction efforts aimed at providing basic services and making a dent in Iraq's 25 percent to 40 percent unemployment rate.

Rep. Brad Miller and I recently urged President Bush to undertake a regional diplomatic initiative, as recommended by the Iraq Study Group, to solicit a greater role for Iraq's neighbors in stabilizing that country, including stronger control over common borders. The worst-case scenario for Iraq continues to be the development of a regional conflagration, ignited by Iraq's sectarian violence, that spreads bloody conflict across the Middle East.

Regional diplomacy is the cornerstone, not just for our efforts in Iraq, but also for our interests in the region. We must reinvigorate efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, establish effective governance and long-term stability in Afghanistan, confront Iran's nuclear proliferation and preserve Lebanon's fragile democracy. As the report rightly notes, we are at risk not only of losing in Iraq, but also of failing in the Middle East as a whole -- an outcome we and the world can ill-afford.

No one -- including the president -- should interpret the initiation of troop withdrawal as a signal that Americans are abandoning Iraq or the Middle East. In fact, the report calls for a broader commitment to the future of the Middle East than the president has been willing to make. The president often pledges his commitment to an Iraq that is at peace with itself and its neighbors; if he is unwilling to tackle the full dimensions of Iraq and the region's challenges, he will all but guarantee his failure to deliver on that pledge.

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