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BYLINE: Chris Matthews, David Gregory, David Shuster, Howard Fineman, Chuck Todd

GUESTS: Al Sharpton, Pat Buchanan, **John Ensign**, Jack Valenti Up next, Republican **Senator John Ensign** of Nevada. How many of his Republican colleagues will vote against President Bush's troop increase when the vote come to floor next week?

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MATTHEWS: Welcome back to HARDBALL.

The Senate is gearing up to criticize President Bush's plans to send more troops to Iraq. How many Republicans will he -- will he get voting against the troop increase? And what will this mean for the president?

Republican **Senator John Ensign** of Nevada sits on the Armed Services Committee, alongside **Senator Warner**.

Senator Ensign, what do you make of Senator John Warner, the former chairman of your committee, coming out with a resolution? I looked at the language today. It's very respectful of the president. But it does oppose the idea of more troops.

SEN. JOHN ENSIGN (R), NEVADA: Well, listening to General Petraeus, who is a -- obviously, everybody here thinks he's a great general. He's one of the best generals that has come along in quite some time.

And he thinks that having that kind of a resolution on the floor of the Senate would be harmful to -- to the troops. And -- and I have to -- you know, I -- I respect John Warner to

a great degree. I think he is just one of the best people to serve in the U.S. Senate. But I disagree with him strongly on this point.

I think that there are some messages that we can send to the Iraqis, especially the Iraqi government and -- and Maliki. But to actually say that you are against what the troops are going to be doing in the next coming months -- you are not going to stop them from doing it -- but just to say you're against it, I think, actually does damage to the troops' morale.

MATTHEWS: We have a new "Newsweek" poll that just came out, Senator. It says that two -- two-thirds of the American people do not believe the president is making judgments based on facts; he's making those judgments based on his personal view of things, whatever that is.

At what point is it the Senate's responsibility to reflect public opinion and say, this president is not dealing with reality on the ground over there?

ENSIGN: Well, Chris, I think that you and I will both agree that, if you govern by polls, that is not leadership. And anybody who just governs, basically, wetting their finger, sticking it up, see which way the wind's blowing, is not -- not a person of courage, not a statesman.

Certainly, Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt would never have governed that way. They did what they thought was right, even in the face of great criticism. And that's what great leaders do.

What President Bush is up against is a very, very difficult situation. And the American people need to understand how difficult the situation in Iraq is.

It's time to really forget whether we're Republicans, whether we're Democrats, and that we're just Americans. And let's -- let's join together to solve this problem.

I disagree with some of the things that the administration is doing over in Iraq. I have -- I have voiced those concerns. I just had a meeting about an hour ago with General Casey, and told him about some of the reconstruction errors over in Iraq that I think that have happened. But I also gave them the ideas of -- of how I think those errors can be corrected into the future.

A lot of people are just criticizing what the president is doing, but they're not offering any constructive plans going forward.

If we're going to join together, let's really put our party labels aside and put together constructive ideas that will be better for America.

MATTHEWS: When does a good American say: "This policy's hurting us in the world; I will stand against the president"?

ENSIGN: Well, I -- I think that you have to be very careful any time that our troops are in harm`s way.

We, as leaders, we have to measure, very carefully, what we say, whether it is going to do harm, or whether it is going to do good. Is it better to have that conversation behind the scenes?

At a certain point, you may want to go in public, but, once again, look to do it in a constructive way. I just wrote -- about a month-and-a-half ago, wrote an op-ed with Senator Hillary Clinton. And we submitted it to "The Wall Street Journal" -- it was published -- because we disagreed with what the administration was doing on the oil, the distribution of the oil revenues to the Iraqi people. I think the administration waited too long to do this.

MATTHEWS: Right.

ENSIGN: That`s why we went public with it.

And not too long after that, the president brought forward and got with Maliki and really put a lot more pressure on him. And now you see Maliki trying to push that law.

I -- that was a constructive thing to do. It did not hurt the troops. It did not hurt our war effort. It actually improved things. And, as leaders, I think we have to be very measured in what we do, and -- and look for things that are going to be good for this country, not just ripping us apart, Republican against Democrat against independent. Let`s just join together as Americans.

MATTHEWS: Well let`s look at history here. So many of these countries formed, as you know, as well as I do -- formed after World War I, in the case of Iraq, or formed during the course of European history by victorious allies.

These countries are created. Then, afterwards, countries like Yugoslavia, once they`re given the choices, they come apart. They just are people who don`t want to be in the same country.

Could Iraq be one of those cases where the differences in religious belief among the various Islamic factions, between Sunni and Shia, is so strong that they would really prefer to be in separate worlds? Could that be where we`re headed over there?

ENSIGN: Well I think, because of the oil situation, with the -- the Kurds having the oil in the -- in the north, and the Shia have the oil in the south, I don`t think that the Sunnis would ever go -- go for that.

And -- and that`s one of the reasons that I believe the oil situation should have been solved a long time ago, because a lot of the insurgency was caused by wondering who

was going to get the oil revenues, the wealth of the country. Was it going to be -- were the Sunnis going to be left out of it?

And the -- and, at the time, al Qaeda took advantage of that and -- and caused a lot of the sectarian violence -- violence by attacking the mosque.

I think that we have to be careful when we're trying to predict the future -- you know, it's going to be one country, 30 countries. I think that, because of the oil -- and, if you do it right, I do think that a unified Iraq would be better for the area, but it also would be better for all three of those people living together.

And, if you can have an economic growth fueled by the owning of oil revenues by the individual, I think that Iraq actually can be successful in the future.

MATTHEWS: Bottom line, Senator -- it's still the acid test -- do you believe, after all these years of war, going back to 2003, that it was in America's interests -- not partisan interests, American interests -- to take the American Army into Iraq? Was that in our interest?

ENSIGN: Chris, you know, hindsight is -- is wonderful.

MATTHEWS: Well, I'm asking you to show some hindsight. You have seen the past. You have a good look at it.

Looking back, was that in America's interests to take the American Army, the bulk of our military strength, into Arabia, into Iraq, to occupy that country? Was that in our interest, to do that thing that the president did?

ENSIGN: Chris -- and I -- and I -- and I'm not trying to be evasive on this -- I think it would dishonor those who have given their lives in the cause for our country to -- to actually second-guess.

The bottom line is, we made the best decision with the information that we were given at the time. To look back, Monday-morning quarterbacking, just doesn't work. The only reason you look back is to try to learn...

MATTHEWS: OK.

ENSIGN: ... for the next time going forward. You have to learn from the mistakes.

MATTHEWS: OK.

Let me challenge you on that, Senator. Have you learned the lessons of Iraq, so we don't repeat them in Iran, that we don't let a bunch of ideologues around the president scare us into a war with Iran, where we find our troops at war with a huge country, a very sophisticated country, with lots of danger in the world, through its elements in the

Hezbollah and elsewhere in the Middle East; we go to war with them on the same kind of argument that Cheney and Wolfowitz and the rest gave us to go into this war?

I'm afraid we're going to get up some morning, we're going to be at war with Iran; Hillary Clinton will be saluting, the rest of the Democrats will be saluting; and the American people will never have had any role in this. That's my worry. That's why I want to go back and look at how we got into this war.

ENSIGN: And, Chris, I think the way that you just stated it right there is very fair. To look back, to see what mistakes were made at the time, to see what kind of judgment calls were made to prevent it in the future is very, very fair.

The mistakes that I think that were made at the time, first of all, we did not have enough intelligence. We did not have enough human intelligence on the ground to make the kind of decisions prior to going into Iraq.

MATTHEWS: I know.

ENSIGN: But, also, the way that we prosecuted, there -- there is no question there were not enough troops on the ground when we -- sure, we could take over the country, but we could not secure the peace in Iraq. We -- we made a huge mistake.

As far as the reconstruction, we did not provide for security, the water infrastructure, the power infrastructure, all of those kinds of things. We did not do that at the beginning.

We should learn from that, and not repeat that mistake, if we ever have to do something like what we did in Iraq again. Those are some valuable lessons that we can learn from history. I hope we -- I hope we have learned those lessons.

MATTHEWS: Senator, I love being out in your state of Nevada. I have met a lot of your colleagues in the Republican Party and in the Democratic Party -- a great state. I love Las Vegas.

ENSIGN: I'm glad you were out there. And...

MATTHEWS: It was a lot of fun.

ENSIGN: ... appreciate you helping the economy out there.

MATTHEWS: And -- and we picked one beautiful Miss America.

Anyway, thank you very much, **Senator John Ensign**.