

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Why Congress Should Embrace the Surge

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By OWEN WEST
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WHEN the civilian hierarchy fails them, soldiers tend to seek solace in Clausewitz's observation that war is an extension of politics. But in 2005 and 2006 the reverse was true in Iraq: the battle churned in place, steadily eroding the administration's credibility and America's psyche, while most politicians stood on the sidelines, content to hurl insults at one another until the battlefield offered a clear political course.

What was most remarkable, however, was the military's inability to grab the reins and articulate a realistic war plan for Iraq. At home, recruiting, supply and deployment crises were solved; but in Iraq the generals continued to offer assessments of the fight that were as obviously inaccurate as those trumpeted by the politicians. The goal was to put Iraqi forces in the lead, but as a consequence, large-scale battlefield adaptation was scarce.

Today the civil-military relationship has righted itself, yet soldiers like me who believe that Iraq can be stabilized face a bitter irony. On one hand, the military is finally making meaningful adjustments to the complex fight. On the other, the politicians are finally asserting themselves. The tragedy is that the two groups are going in opposite directions.

Most Americans who have served side by side with Iraqi units, especially those of us who have been advisers to Iraqi companies and battalions, believe that significant numbers of our soldiers will be needed in Iraq for another decade. This timeline is about average for a classic insurgency, and optimistic for one so muddied by tribal feuds and religious hatred.

American soldiers in Iraq are constantly asked about our commitment to a fight we started. Most of the advisers I got to know during my most recent tour, which ended in February, were quick to try to assuage their Iraqi counterparts' concerns and dismissive of the calls for withdrawal by American politicians, news of which trickled onto the battlefield during the winter. After all, the surge itself would not be fully under way until mid-summer. Surely the politicians would give it a chance to work.

The two Congressional votes last week establishing timelines for withdrawing American troops completely undermined such assurances. The confusion stems from an inherent contradiction in our politics: Though the burden of war is shouldered by few, the majority of Americans want to vacate Iraq, and the percentages are increasing. Something has to give.

We're four years into a global conflict that will span generations, fighting virulent ideologues obsessed with expansion. It's time for those who are against the war in Iraq to consider the probable military consequences of withdrawal. But it is also time for supporters of the war to step back and recognize that public opinion in great part dictates our martial options.

It's hard for a soldier like me to reconcile a political jab like Senator Harry Reid's "this war is lost, and this surge is not accomplishing anything" when it's made in front of a banner that reads "Support Our Troops." But the politician's job is different from the soldier's. Mr. Reid's belief — that the best way to support the troops is by acknowledging defeat and pulling them out of Iraq — is likely shared by a large slice of the population, which gives it legitimacy.

It seems oddly detached, however, from what's happening on the battlefield. The Iraqi battalion I lived with is stationed outside of Habbaniya, a small city in violent Anbar Province. Together with a fledgling police force and a Marine battalion, these Iraqi troops made Habbaniya a relatively secure place: it has a souk where Iraqi soldiers can shop outside their armored Humvees, public generators that don't

mysteriously explode, children who walk to school on their own. The area became so stable, in fact, that it attracted the attention of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia. In late February, the Sunni insurgents blew up the mosque, killing 36.

If American politicians pull the marines out of Anbar, the Iraqi soldiers told me, they too will have to pull back, ceding some zones to protect others. The same is true in the Baghdad neighborhoods where the early stages of the surge have made life livable again.

Then America will be left with a dilemma: we could either vainly try to patrol Iraq's borders to keep the murderous foreign insurgents out and the swollen ranks of Al Qaeda in, or we could make assaults every six months or so into fallen cities and neighborhoods, like the bloody fight to retake Falluja in 2004. Either way, the cost of quitting will be heavier fighting by American troops.

So how can we reconcile this military reality with the desire by the majority of Americans to reduce troop levels in Iraq? The current surge may provide an excellent opportunity, if we acknowledge two things: Iraq is now a law enforcement war and Iraqi security forces are best suited to fight it.

The surge must be accompanied by a commensurate surge in Iraqi troops. To date, the Iraqis have simply been shifting soldiers from other areas into Baghdad. But these are stop-gap soldiers — as are our own — when what we seek is permanence. The Iraqi government must double the size of its army, to 300,000 combat troops from 150,000 today. The American surge will give them the breathing room to do so, and a deadline by which it must be done.

The idea is that, starting this fall, the Iraqi units would bulk up so the American units could begin to break up, moving to an advisory model in which the number of American soldiers embedded with Iraqi units triples while the overall United States force declines. Today many American patrols operate independently. In a year's time, ideally, no

American patrol would leave its base without a fully integrated Iraqi presence.

Oddly, the Congressional resolutions calling for withdrawal would allow for this continued American advisory presence, somehow not including these troops as “combat forces.” So even those members of Congress who voted for the resolutions could support bulking up the number of Americans assigned to Iraqi units without appearing as hypocrites.

The issue will be the numbers. A meaningful advisory force — both the embedded troops and the support personnel — would likely mean 75,000 Americans still in Iraq in the fall of 2008. This is about half of what we’ll have in place for the surge this summer, but more than the supporters of the resolutions might expect.

It will take political courage for these politicians to agree to the needed advisory forces. But it is the only way the Iraqis themselves will ever be able to make their country secure. And that is the one goal on which all Americans, those who support the war and those who “support the troops,” should be able to agree.

Owen West, a Wall Street trader and major in the Marine Reserves, has served two tours in Iraq.