

Two Republican senators attack Bush's "surge" in Iraq

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27 June 2007

In a surprise political shift, one of the most senior Republican lawmakers warned from the floor of the US Senate Monday evening that the Bush administration's military offensive in Iraq is doomed to failure and undermines Washington's strategic interests in the region and internationally. A second Republican senator issued a similar declaration the following day.

Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and former chairman of the panel, had been a consistent supporter of the Iraq war and voted against Democratic attempts to attach language to recent war-funding legislation proposing a timetable for a partial withdrawal of American troops from the country.

His speech Monday, which called for a drawdown of US military forces in Iraq, was all the more unsettling to the White House in that other Republican leaders who had voiced reservations about the military escalation in Iraq had insisted that a review and possible revision of US policy should wait until September, when the senior American commander on the ground in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, and the US Ambassador in Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, are set to deliver a progress report to Congress.

Following Lugar's lead, another Senate Republican, George Voinovich of Ohio, took a similar stance Tuesday in a public statement accompanied by a letter to the White House. "We must not abandon our mission, but we must begin a transition where the Iraqi government and its neighbors play a larger role in stabilizing Iraq," Voinovich wrote to Bush.

Echoing the statements of many Democratic senators and presidential candidates, Voinovich suggested that the threat of withdrawal would be useful in pressuring the Iraqi government and the neighboring Arab states.

The senior Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, John Warner of Virginia, warned that Lugar and Voinovich would not be the last Senate Republicans to publicly oppose the "surge" strategy. After the week-long Fourth of July recess, "you'll be hearing a number of statements from other colleagues," he said.

The shift by a section of Senate Republicans, signaled by Lugar's speech, is another indication that the debacle unleashed by the US intervention in Iraq is rapidly worsening and that significant sections of America's ruling elite fear that it will produce catastrophic results.

US military commanders in Iraq have begun openly to voice frustration over the failure to deploy sufficient numbers of trained Iraqi troops loyal to the Washington-backed government to hold any ground secured in the course of the US surge, which has brought an additional 30,000 American troops into the country.

Meanwhile, an opinion poll released Tuesday by CNN indicated that

only 30 percent of Americans support the Iraq war—the lowest figure ever—and two-thirds want the withdrawal of US troops to begin immediately. Also, for the first time, the poll showed more than half of those surveyed—54 percent—said that they did not believe the war was morally justified.

Lugar's remarks hardly reflected these popular sentiments. Rather, their thrust was that the current US policy is at odds with US strategic interests in the region, among which he prominently listed its oil reserves, and is hampering the ability of Washington to intervene elsewhere in the world. He made it clear that he is calling for neither a total withdrawal of American troops nor a specific timetable for even a partial withdrawal, but rather a more balanced use of US military force and diplomacy to achieve the essential objectives for which the war was launched in the first place.

"Our course in Iraq has lost contact with our vital national security interests in the Middle East and beyond," Lugar declared. "Our continuing absorption with military activities in Iraq is limiting our diplomatic assertiveness there and elsewhere in the world."

The Republican Senator described the chances of Bush's "surge" succeeding as "very limited" and warned that its failure could precipitate "a poorly planned withdrawal that undercuts our vital interests in the Middle East."

Lugar argued that the military escalation that has been underway since the beginning of this year is serving to weaken rather than strengthen the US strategic position in the region.

"In my judgment, the costs and risks of continuing down the current path outweigh the potential benefits that might be achieved," he said. "Persisting indefinitely with the surge strategy will delay policy adjustments that have a better chance of protecting our vital interests over the long term."

He went on to warn that the deepening sectarian divisions in Iraq, the deterioration of the American military under the impact of the colonial war there and the political calendar in the US, with presidential elections approaching, rendered prospects for Washington stabilizing the Iraqi government "in a reasonable time frame" virtually nil.

The present focus placed on imposing "benchmarks" on the Iraqi government is, Lugar asserted, largely futile and has little to do with US interests. Instead, he said these benchmarks serve either as "a means of justifying a withdrawal by demonstrating that Iraq is irredeemable" or as "an attempt to validate our military presence by showing progress against a low fixed standard."

American strategy, he said, "must adjust to the reality that sectarian factionalism will not abate any time soon and probably cannot be controlled from the top."

He also warned sharply that the prospects for success of the US escalation were severely undermined by “the fatigue of our military.”

“The window during which we can continue to employ American troops in Iraqi neighborhoods without damaging our military strength or our ability to respond to other national security priorities is closing,” said Lugar.

He pointed to mounting military recruitment problems, decreased readiness of US combat units and grueling back-to-back deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan that are lasting between 12 and 15 months.

He cited one recent poll indicating that only 1 out of 10 American youth has a “propensity to serve” in the US military, the lowest rate in the history of such surveys. At the same time, he added, given that only 3 out of 10 youths “meet basic physical, behavioral, and academic requirements for military service, the consequences of continuing to stretch the military are dire.” The US military, he warned, “is not indestructible.”

Finally, he warned that a continuation of partisan debates over Iraq into the 2008 election period, with the White House stonewalling the Democratic-led Congress for the next year and a half, “contains extreme risks for U.S. national security.”

Such a protracted conflict, he said, “would greatly increase the chances for a poorly planned withdrawal from Iraq or possibly the broader Middle East region that could damage US interests for decades.”

Lugar was blunt in defining the “vital interests at stake” for American capitalism. “The vitality of the U.S. economy and the economies of much of the world depend on the oil that comes from the Persian Gulf,” he declared.

The way in which the war is presently being fought, he argued, is undermining those interests. He urged the Bush Administration to shift its focus from creating a stable US-backed regime in Iraq to defending “fundamental national security goals,” which he defined as preventing Iraq from becoming a terrorist “safe haven,” stopping the spread of the upheavals in Iraq to the rest of the region, protecting oil installations, blocking Iranian regional dominance and “limiting the loss of US credibility in the region and throughout the world as a result of our Iraq mission.”

While arguing that the current surge is ineffective in achieving these aims, Lugar insisted that a total withdrawal of US troops from the country would undermine American interests.

Instead he proposed a “downsizing” of US military forces in Iraq, with American occupation troops redeployed to bases in Kuwait or other neighboring states, Kurdish held territory and “defensible locations in Iraq outside of urban areas.” He also called for an end to “the US attempt to interpose ourselves between Iraqi sectarian factions.”

Such a reduction in US military forces in Iraq, he said, was necessary because the current deployment levels “have placed US foreign policy on a defensive footing and drawn resources from other national security endeavors, including Afghanistan.” He added, “In this era, the United States cannot afford to be on a defensive footing indefinitely.”

Lugar’s speech was largely consistent with the views outlined in an opinion piece published in the *Washington Post* last week by Republican presidential candidate James Gilmore, a former Virginia governor and former Republican Party chairman. Calling for a “third way,” Gilmore rejected both the surge and an immediate withdrawal of US troops, arguing that the US define its “goals in terms of America’s national interest, and let the people of Iraq take care of

their national interests.” To that end he urged a “limited deliberate drawdown” of US troops and the “redeployment of the forces remaining in the region to areas where they can more efficiently and effectively carry out a clearly defined mission.”

The Bush White House responded Tuesday to Lugar’s speech, urging greater patience with the ongoing US military operations. White House spokesman Tony Snow claimed that the administration had “known that he’s had reservations about the policy for some time.” He added, “We hope that members of the House and Senate give the Baghdad security plan a chance to unfold.”

Meanwhile, Senate Democratic leaders hailed Lugar as a hero. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada called the speech “brilliant” and “courageous,” predicting that it would go down in history as a turning point in the war.

Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin, an Illinois Democrat who has postured as an opponent of the war, applauded Lugar’s speech as “thoughtful, sincere and honest,” calling it in the “finest tradition of the US Senate.” He urged both Democrats and Republicans “to step back from the debate on Iraq” and take Lugar’s remarks as “the starting point for a meaningful debate, a debate that looks at the conflict in a realistic way.”

This Democratic praise for Lugar serves to expose the real political character of the party’s supposed opposition to the Iraq war. The aim of the six-term Republican Senator from Indiana is not to end the US imperialist intervention in Iraq and the wider region, but rather to rescue it. His argument boils down to a call for a more rational use of US military power by abandoning efforts to pacify Iraqi cities or suppress sectarian conflicts, concentrating instead on defending strategic US interests, first and foremost, oil. One of the key rationales given for such a policy is the need to use the US armed forces elsewhere, including, undoubtedly, in a future military intervention against Iran.

This is largely the Democratic position as well. Behind all the political theater about “ending the war” that accompanied last month’s abortive attempts by Congressional Democrats to attach timetables and conditions on military deployments in Iraq to the \$120 billion supplemental war-funding bill, the language of the Democratic resolutions included provisions for a “reduced mission” for US troops in Iraq. This included “counter-terrorism operations,” training of Iraqi puppet forces and protection of US citizens and facilities, presumably including American-operated oil fields—a set of objectives that would undoubtedly keep tens of thousands of soldiers on Iraqi soil for the foreseeable future.

In the face of what is clearly emerging as a catastrophic failure of the US bid to conquer Iraq, the outlines of a new bipartisan policy is beginning to emerge in opposition to the present course taken by the Bush administration. It is a policy designed to continue US war and colonialism in Iraq, the broader region of the Middle East and internationally, while seeking to divert and contain the broad popular antiwar sentiment of the American people.



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