

US generals call for extension of Iraq war

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In an unprecedented display of military intervention into an ongoing political debate in the United States, five high-ranking officers, four of them in command positions in Iraq, have publicly opposed the growing popular demand for immediate withdrawal of US troops and urged the extension of the war at current or even greater levels of violence, for years to come.

These declarations amount to blatant defiance of the longstanding principle that the US military should stay out of politics, and that the military is subordinate to civilian control, exercised through representatives elected by the people. The military brass is instead rallying to the anti-democratic posture taken by President Bush, who has repeatedly declared that decisions on military policy in Iraq should be made by commanders on the ground, not by “politicians in Washington.”

The statements by the five officers were the product of a coordinated White House effort to go on the political offensive after the abandonment of attempts by Senate Democrats to impose even the mildest of restrictions on US military operations in Iraq. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid called off debate on war-related amendments to the defense authorization bill Wednesday, and the barrage of bellicose comments from the Pentagon began the next day.

General David Petraeus made his remarks during a videoconference briefing on Iraq July 19 for senators and congressmen who sit on committees with responsibility for military and foreign policy and military appropriations. In response to a question from a pro-war Republican congressman, he said that any announcement of a planned US withdrawal would spread fear among Iraqis who were cooperating with the occupation, disrupt ongoing political negotiations in Baghdad, and increase sectarian violence.

Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, the deputy US commander in Iraq, went considerably further in his comments. Both during the videoconference and in subsequent remarks to reporters in Iraq, he called into question the mid-September deadline set by Congress for a report on results of the “surge.” Odierno claimed that there had been “significant success” in the past month but that it would not be possible to know by mid-September whether this was “just a blip.” He said that “to do a good assessment” would require “at least until November.”

After congressional and media criticism of this open challenge to the legislated mandate of a September 15 reporting date—voiced even by Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell—Odierno and the White House each issued statements denying that the general had said what he said.

“There is no intention to push our reporting requirement beyond

September,” Odierno said in a written statement. “Nothing I said yesterday should be interpreted to suggest otherwise. My reference to November was simply suggesting that as we go forward beyond September, we will gain more understanding of trends.”

White House spokesman Tony Snow added, “We’re not trying to sort of change the ball game. We understand what the reporting requirements are.”

His words were contradicted, however, by the comments of two other American generals in Iraq, speaking to the Associated Press Friday. Maj. Gen. Rick Lynch, commander of the Third Infantry Division, which operates south of Baghdad, said, “I worry about this talk about reducing or terminating the surge.”

Lynch said that from the time he arrived in Iraq to head his portion of the escalation last March, he had calculated that his mission would require 15 months’ deployment. “It’s going to take through summer, into the fall, to defeat the extremists in my battle space,” he elaborated, “and it’s going to take me into next spring and summer to generate this sustained security presence.”

A pullback before the summer of 2008 would amount to negating the sacrifices made by his soldiers, including the deaths of 56 men in the past three months, he maintained, adding, “It would be wrong to have fought and won that terrain, only to give it back.”

Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Walter E. Gaskin, the commander of American forces in western Anbar province, suggested an even longer timeframe for the current escalation, up to two years, although he repeated the claims from the Pentagon that the collaboration of a group of Sunni sheiks meant that the US forces had “turned the corner” in the struggle in Anbar.

Gaskin argued that Iraqi security forces needed considerable training and combat experience. “I see that experience happening every day, but I don’t see it happening overnight,” he said. “I believe it’s another couple of years in order to get to that.”

Conceding that he was out of step with public opinion in the United States, Gaskin said, “That’s not a political answer. That’s a military answer.”

In Washington, the commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. James T. Conway, spoke at the National Press Club Friday to condemn a “premature” withdrawal, embracing the Bush administration’s claim that Iraq is part of a worldwide, generation-long struggle against Islamic terrorism.

“If you lose the first battles of a long war, the war gets tougher,” Conway said. “If you win the first battles, you’ve got momentum on your side, and, guess what, the war is shorter.”

Referring to proposed legislative mandates for withdrawal of combat troops, Conway added, “My concern is if we prematurely

move, we're going to be going back.... I tend to think it's better to get it done the first time."

Bush lined up alongside the generals. In a stage-managed appearance in the White House Rose Garden Friday, he denounced congressional criticism of his Iraq war strategy and demanded passage of new legislation that would authorize and fund the war through the remainder of his term of office.

Appearing after a meeting with pro-war veterans and military family members, Bush portrayed the indefinite continuation of the slaughter in Iraq as "support" for the soldiers who are dying there. He called on Congress "to give our troops time to carry out our new strategy in Iraq"—the escalation of the war through the dispatch of an additional 30,000 combat troops—which he claimed had achieved "important successes."

The *Los Angeles Times* reported Saturday that while Congress was debating the course of the war in Iraq, "inside the administration, a less visible but no less passionate debate is quietly underway—over whether the 'surge' should continue even longer." The report to be submitted by Petraeus in September would include the option of expanding or extending the surge, the newspaper revealed, adding, "Evidence is mounting that military commanders favor a continuation of the buildup, which now has the troop level at 158,000, through next spring."

The Bush administration is elaborating military plans on the basis of an assumption that the war will continue at least at present levels of intensity through the remaining 18 months of Bush's tenure in the White House. According to other press reports, Pentagon officials have denied making any plans for a "post-surge" presence in Iraq. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, speaking on the same videoconference Thursday with General Petraeus, said no such planning was underway. "I am not aware of these efforts and my whole focus is involved in the implementation of Plan A," he said.

Bush administration officials have even publicly suggested that to discuss plans for a post-surge reduction in US forces amounts to strengthening the "enemy" in Iraq—invariably defined as Al Qaeda terrorism, not Iraqi resistance to foreign occupation.

That was the substance of the extraordinary letter sent to Senator Hillary Clinton July 16 by Eric S. Edelman, the undersecretary of defense for policy, and the senior surviving neo-conservative in the Pentagon civilian hierarchy (as well as a former aide to Vice President Cheney).

Clinton wrote to Edelman in May, in her capacity as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, asking what planning had been done in the Pentagon for the kind of partial drawdown in US troop presence advocated by Senate Democrats. Edelman waited two months, until the day of the Senate's 24-hour debate on Iraq war policy, before firing off a two-page letter containing a thinly disguised suggestion that Clinton was a traitor.

"Premature and public discussion of the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq reinforces enemy propaganda that the United States will abandon its allies in Iraq, much as we are perceived to have done in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia," he wrote. "Such talk understandably unnerves the very same Iraqi allies we are asking to assume enormous personal risks...." It also "exacerbates sectarian trends" in Iraq, as the rival factions focus their

maneuvers on securing the most advantageous position in a post-occupation environment.

Clinton's office released the letter with an obvious political motive, hoping that the vitriolic attack on the senator would raise her standing among antiwar voters and help overshadow her long record of support for the invasion and continuing US occupation of Iraq—a position she still holds today.

The letter is nonetheless significant, mainly for its tone of belligerent intolerance of any criticism of the war and any congressional input into policymaking. This reflects the mood, not just of the desperate neo-conservative faction within the Bush administration, which spearheaded the drive to war, but of wide sections of the military establishment.

The Pentagon brass, whatever their conflicts with former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld over the conduct of the war, regard a forced US withdrawal from Iraq as a debacle for the American military machine that will have incalculable consequences.

The military officer corps has been trained in the purported "lesson" of the Vietnam War, that it was civilian interference with military operations that produced the historic US defeat. This theory resembles nothing so much as the infamous "stab-in-the-back" theory of Adolf Hitler, whose Nazi Party blamed Germany's defeat in World War I on the activities of socialists, communists and Jews.

In a similar fashion, the American military more and more sees itself arrayed against what it regards as the "enemy within"—not so much the congressional Democrats, whose "opposition" to the war is both toothless and insincere, as the great majority of the American people who have turned decisively against the war and all its perpetrators and apologists.



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