

General Petraeus gives Senate a blueprint for an unending occupation of Iraq

Bill Van Auken in Washington
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Gen. David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker testified before two packed hearings on Capitol Hill Monday, serving up the predetermined recommendation that the US occupation of Iraq continue indefinitely, with troop levels remaining at more than 140,000. That figure is higher than the number deployed in Iraq before the so-called “surge,” as the Bush administration terms its escalation begun over a year ago.

There were few surprises in the testimony by the US commander and US ambassador to Iraq when they appeared before the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees. There was even less in the way of probing questions—not to mention sharp political challenges—from the members of the Democratic-led panels.

The core of Petraeus’s statement was a set of recommendations that was laughable in terms of its vagueness. After the last of the “surge” combat brigades are withdrawn in July—a troop reduction that is imposed by the unavailability of units to replace them—Petraeus said the Iraqi commanders would use the next 45 days for “consolidation and evaluation.” After that period, they would commence in mid-September “a process of assessment to examine the conditions on the ground” to determine if further troop cuts were possible.

The general acknowledged that “this approach does not allow establishment of a set withdrawal timetable; however, it does provide the flexibility” that he said was needed to maintain “still fragile security gains” supposedly achieved through the surge.

Defying attempts to pin him down on how long it would take to make an “assessment”—or, for that matter, how this process differed from the previous 45 days of “evaluation”—Petraeus insisted that the entire process would be determined by the “geometry of the battlefield” and the “calculus” of diplomacy and politics.

For his part, Ambassador Crocker reiterated the administration’s position that the bilateral agreement being negotiated with the Iraqi regime headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki for the long-term deployment of US troops in Iraq will not be submitted to the Senate for approval, but will instead be imposed by executive fiat.

On the day of the testimony, the British *Guardian* newspaper published an account of what it called a “secret” draft of the agreement, reporting that it “shows that provision is being made for an open-ended military presence in the country.”

Crocker even attempted to suggest that the failed US-backed offensive in the southern port of Basra was a sign of the political maturing of Iraq’s government. It showed, he said, that Washington’s puppets in Baghdad were willing to “take on criminals and extremists, regardless of their ethnic identity.”

That the Maliki government launched the assault in a bid to cut off the legs of the one movement in the country that poses a serious challenge to the governing parties in elections scheduled for October—something that is universally recognized in Iraq—was not even hinted at by the ambassador.

He allowed, however, that the Sadrist movement, with its base among the most impoverished sections of the Shia working class, remained the

“wild card” in Iraq. On the same day, Muqtada al-Sadr issued a statement in Iraq suggesting that he might abrogate the eight-month-old truce observed by his Mahdi Army, a key factor in the partial reduction of violence attributed to the surge.

Both the ambassador and the general argued that the surge was working. Petraeus claimed it had brought “progress in the security arena,” while cautioning that these gains were “fragile and reversible.” For his part, Crocker pointed to a smattering of legislation pushed through the Iraqi parliament, such as a bill that is supposed to allow former members of the deposed Baathist regime to collect their pensions.

To the extent that the Democrats—and in some cases Republicans—expressed disagreement with the Iraq policy, it was mostly a matter of nibbling around its edges and venting frustration with its progress, rather than any direct challenge to the strategic aims and interests that gave rise to the war in the first place.

There is an obvious reason for their reticence, as the Democrats are fully complicit in the evolution of the war. Moreover, since gaining the leadership of both houses of Congress in the 2006 elections, they have failed to enact any legislation to end the war and have continued to fund it.

They are likewise incapable of directly indicting Petraeus for carrying political water for the Bush administration—which he obviously is—as they themselves voted unanimously to endorse him as the supreme commander of US forces in occupied Iraq.

Thus, Senator Carl Levin, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, spent much of his opening remarks decrying the fact that Iraq was not shouldering the costs of its occupation by the US with its “windfall” oil revenues. Iraq, he said, “has \$30 billion in US banks, but Iraqi leaders and bureaucrats are not spending these funds,” leaving it to the US government to pay for infrastructure projects and the training and equipping of Iraqi security forces.

“To add insult to injury,” Levin continued, “Americans are paying \$3 to \$4 on gas at the pump here at home, much of which originates in the Middle East, including Iraq.”

This was a theme repeated over and over again by Democrats and Republicans alike: that the debacle created by the unprovoked US war of aggression against Iraq is actually the fault not of Washington, but of the Iraqis themselves.

Levin concluded his remarks by calling for a “reasonable timetable for the withdrawal of most of our troops,” a formulation reiterated in one form or another throughout the day by leading Democrats—including the party’s presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. The words are carefully chosen to exclude an immediate and complete withdrawal of US forces, providing for the continued occupation of Iraq by tens of thousands of American troops for many years to come.

The Republican presidential candidate and the party’s ranking member on the Senate Armed Services Committee, John McCain, sought to have it both ways, supporting a continuation of the Bush administration’s current policy in Iraq, while disassociating himself from what led up to it.

He praised the surge for making it “possible to talk about Iraq with real hope and optimism,” while declaring that the previous “four years of mismanaged war had almost brought us to a point of no return.”

In the question-and-answer period, Petraeus repeated the version of the Basra events that had previously been reported in the media, claiming that the US command in Iraq was given virtually no notice of Maliki’s supposedly unilateral decision to send Iraqi troops and police to attack the southern city. He claimed that the plan was first raised in a Friday night meeting, followed by a Saturday session in which a battle plan was put forward, and that Maliki was in Basra directing operations by Monday.

In one of the few more pointed questions posed in the hearings, Senator Edward Kennedy (Democrat of Massachusetts) asked both Petraeus and Crocker: “Were you in any meeting with Vice President Cheney in which a discussion of the issue of the Basra invasion took place?”

Crocker responded, “No, sir.” Petraeus quickly added, “Same answer, Senator.”

Kennedy’s line of inquiry clearly suggested that within official Washington it is widely suspected that Cheney’s surprise visit to Baghdad barely a week before the assault on Basra was a catalyst for the ill-fated offensive. The American vice president reportedly discussed both the upcoming provincial elections and the prospects for legislation opening up Iraqi oil reserves to exploitation by US energy conglomerates. The Sadrist movement could defeat the ruling parties, particularly in Iraq’s south, in these elections, and it has opposed the planned oil legislation.

The Massachusetts senator made no attempt to pursue this line of inquiry.

Senator John Warner, Republican of Virginia, repeated the same question that he posed when Petraeus and Crocker appeared before the armed services panel six months ago: whether all of the bloodshed in Iraq had made the US any more secure.

Last September, Petraeus made news by replying that he really did not know. This time around, he had obviously thought better of his answer. While replying that the question “ultimately can only be answered by history,” he stressed that he viewed the ongoing operation from the standpoint of “how best to achieve our interests in Iraq,” which he defined from the standpoint of defeating Iranian influence and securing US objectives in the global economy.

Asked by Warner if it troubled him that “up to 80 percent of Americans don’t think it’s worth it,” Petraeus merely reiterated that he thought it was.

Senator Joseph Lieberman, the so-called independent Democrat, used his questioning to promote aggression against Iran.

“Are Iranians still training and equipping extremists who are going back into Iraq and killing American soldiers?” he asked.

Petraeus answered in the affirmative, but provided no evidence to back his claim. He merely asserted that so-called “special groups,” an American-invented term meant to designate Iranian-directed militias in Iraq, were the only ones who would have the capability to target American forces with sophisticated rockets and explosively formed projectiles.

Lieberman continued, “Is it fair to say that Iran was responsible for killing ‘thousands... or rather hundreds of American soldiers’ in Iraq. Petraeus responded: “I do believe that is correct.”

Finally, Lieberman praised Maliki’s ordering of the offensive against Basra, declaring that it showed that he would “not tolerate the Iranian-backed militias essentially running wild and controlling the south of the country.”

Crocker responded that this was “exactly the signal the operation has sent within Iraq and hopefully throughout the region.”

That this is patent nonsense seemed to bother no one. Sadr’s followers in Basra and elsewhere have less support from and relations with Iran than the Shia parties supporting Maliki, including the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, whose own Iranian-trained militias fought alongside government

troops against the Sadrist Mahdi Army.

The same theme was repeated over and over again in the testimony, with Crocker warning repeatedly about Teheran’s “malign influence” within Iraq and its pursuit of a supposed “Lebanonization strategy” aimed at turning elements of the Shia community into an Iranian proxy force.

It was clear that new lies are being fashioned to justify yet another war, as Washington fears its objectives of subordinating Iraq and its oil wealth to US strategic interests could be lost because of the influence of a regional rival.

Neither of the two Democratic presidential candidates—upon whom the glare of the media was fixated—made any significant impression. Like virtually all of the senators, they made a point of praising the “magnificent” performance of the US troops.

In the armed services hearing, Clinton provided an exceedingly meek defense against an open attack from McCain on her proposal for a partial withdrawal of US troops as “irresponsible.”

“I think it could be fair to say that it might well be irresponsible to continue the policy that has not produced the results that have been promised time and time again,” she said.

She then cited previous testimony from Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen to the effect that the continued elevated troop levels in Iraq did not allow for deploying sufficient numbers of soldiers in the ongoing war in Afghanistan.

Obama sounded a similar note in the foreign relations hearing, making no direct challenge to either Petraeus or Crocker, but lamenting that the tying down of 140,000 troops in Iraq had created an “inability to send our soldiers to the real front line of the war against Al Qaeda, which lies somewhere between Afghanistan and Pakistan.” He insisted that Washington had to make “logical choices” and pointed out that the US had spent “less in six years in Afghanistan than it has in three weeks in Iraq.”

The Democratic presidential front-runner assured the general that “no one is asking for a precipitous withdrawal,” while stressing that “our resources are finite.”

There was a peculiar and decidedly undemocratic atmosphere surrounding the entire proceedings. The delicacy and outright obsequiousness with which the Democratic and Republican politicians addressed the four-star general called to mind the corrupt senate of Rome meeting with the returning commander of the legions.

Within the rows reserved for spectators, a substantial section of the audience was there because of their passionate opposition to the war. One man was dragged out after screaming repeatedly, “Bring them home.” Armed members of the Capitol police lined each aisle threatening those carrying signs opposing the continued occupation of Iraq with ejection.

Petraeus himself was escorted through the halls of the Dirksen Senate office building by a phalanx of Secret Service agents and Capitol police, who barred anyone from following him.

As the Senate went through this sham of democratic oversight, the killing continued in Iraq. Fighting raged between US and Iraqi puppet forces and residents in Baghdad’s Sadr City slums for a third straight day, as Petraeus and Crocker testified on the success of the surge. Mortar shells again struck the US-controlled Green Zone, while a roadside bomb hit an American patrol near Sadr City, injuring a number of soldiers.



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