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Center for American Progress

**SPECIAL PRESENTATION**

**“NO END IN SIGHT: CONVERSATIONS ON IRAQ”**

**INTRODUCTION BY:**

**RUDY DELEON, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF NATIONAL  
SECURITY AND INTERNATIONAL POLICY,  
CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS**

**MODERATED BY:**

**BRIAN KATULIS, SENIOR FELLOW,  
CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS**

**FEATURED SPEAKER:**

**CHARLES FERGUSON, AUTHOR, *NO END IN SIGHT***

**12:00 PM – 1:30 PM  
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MR. RUDY DELEON: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Center for American Progress. The Center for American Progress will host a series of events and produce several analyses in the coming weeks examining the course of the war in Iraq and proposing next steps for U.S. policymakers. The series will include speeches by prominent policymakers and panel discussions on important aspects of Iraq policy and its effects on U.S. national security.

The Center will also be releasing updated analyses concerning the current policy in Iraq and offering alternatives, all trying to contribute to the debate. The analyses will be catalogued on the War in Iraq page of the Center for American Progress website, providing a detailed source of information on our nation's war in Iraq, necessary debate alternatives as we look at this five-year anniversary.

Now, our first speaker today was scheduled to be Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island, West Point graduate, member of the Armed Services Committee, but Senate business is keeping him at the Senate and he's not able to join us. We do, however, have, and have distributed to all, his trip report on his most recent trip to Iraq. That's available and though we can't have him with us in person, we do have his report available to us.

Senator Reed is an important voice in the debate on national security in the Senate and for our country as a West Point graduate, as an Army veteran, and I think he would remark on the tremendous sacrifice in service that the men and women of the armed forces of the United States are making on behalf of our country and its citizens. They have performed well, but the challenge is performing well in a policy that sometimes has not. And so that begins the focus of our discussions here today.

I'm going to yield to introduce and moderate the first panel in our Iraqi program to my colleague and a fellow here at the center, Brian Katulis. He's recently back from Pakistan where he was an election observer. He'll be returning there soon. He has traveled extensively in the region and is really one of our experts, along with Dr. Lawrence Korb, one of our experts on Iraq and policy alternatives. He's also – this summer, will be part of a book for his new book that he has co-written with Nancy Soderberg on the prosperity agenda, looking at American policy alternatives for the future in the national security area.

So to start our first panel here today, and our distinguished speaker, let me yield to Brian Katulis.

MR. BRIAN KATULIS: Thanks, Rudy. Thanks again for coming to the Center for American Progress. As Rudy mentioned, this is the first in a series of events that

we'll be having over the next five or six weeks and we're really honored that you've come.

Next Thursday, I'd like to highlight a panel that we'll be having here at the Center, same time, same place, to discuss the surge. We're pleased to have Retired Major General Robert Scales, along with Michelle Flournoy from the Center for a New American Security, and Andrew Bacevich of Boston University, to debate and discuss the impact of the surge over the last year or so with our colleague, Larry Korb.

It's an honor for me to introduce Charles Ferguson today and our discussion. Charles is the director and producer of "No End in Sight," which, in my view, is one of the most important films in 2007. It was the second highest grossing feature documentary last year after Michael Moore's "Sicko." It received an Academy Award nomination for best documentary film and won a special jury prize at last year Sundance Film Festival and received numerous other awards.

Charles has a very interesting background, very successful. He is currently the founder and president of Representational Pictures. He's had a successful career in corporate America, has a Ph.D. in political science from MIT, and is the kind of guy that has a lot of interesting and sharp ideas in many different realms. He was just telling me about a few new ventures that he's about to start.

This afternoon, we're going to talk about Charles' film, but also a new book that he's produced, and we'll talk a little bit about it, *No End in Sight: Descent into Chaos*. And what I thought we'd do today to start off is begin our discussion showing a clip or two of the film. I'll ask a few questions to Charles, and then we'll open it up, and hopefully, have a very interesting and lively discussion.

So the first clip here – maybe you want to introduce it. It's on the – (inaudible).

MR. FERGUSON: Yes, okay. So you're about to see a short clip from the film, which is about the looting that occurred in Baghdad as soon as U.S. troops took Baghdad. And so let me just say by brief way of background, U.S. troops took Baghdad after roughly three weeks of war and in fact, it turned out that looting had occurred throughout the entire war. Every time U.S. or British troops took a city, looting broke out in that city, typically because there weren't enough troops left in the city to maintain order and also because those troops had no orders to try and maintain order. The first major Iraqi city that was severely damaged by looting was Basra, which was taken relatively early by the British and so there was about two weeks warning in kind of the system before what you're about to see.

(Begin video segment.)

MS. : While we were in Kuwait, they were as glued to the television set as everyone else. There was the realization that there was absolute lawlessness and chaos going on in Iraq.

MR. : The Americans weren't doing anything. They would sit at certain intersections, but they wouldn't actually get out of the Humvees or out of the tanks and really do much.

MR. : Time passed and we didn't see any progress. The only progress we found is the uncontrolled freedom looters had to loot all the governmental buildings, and even private-owned companies.

MR. : The looting was partly a factor of the troop levels and the sense that Rumsfeld communicated to his commanders, and his commanders communicated down the chain to the platoon and company level, that we were not there to run Iraq. We were there to get rid of the regime and get out.

MR. : We're not under martial law there. In his order, General McKiernan was not told to establish martial law; not once was martial law declared.

MR. : I'll just – I'll tell you honestly. We're in a transition period. There is an Iraqi civil law, but there's no – I just heard that we just opened up the first two courts today, so –you're starting at nothing –

MR. : Had martial law been declared, which would have been authorized under the Fourth Geneva Convention, maybe we would have had a bit more security.

MR. : We're a platoon of marines. We can certainly stop looting if we – if that was our assigned task.

MR. : The greatest mystery of post-war Iraq involves that month or so after the fall of Baghdad, why the U.S. didn't do anything to control the looting because in a way, everything that's been a problem since then started in that first moment.

MR. : People at the National Security Council, Secretary Powell, myself, and others, the CIA director, did express concern about the looting.

MR. FERGUSON: Did you express any concern to President Bush?

MR. : I was at a meeting where it was expressed by my boss.

MR. FERGUSON: Tell me what Mr. Powell said at that meeting.

MR. : Well, it's not the way we generally work. Our advice to the president is generally kept that way, private to the president.

MS. : The word came from Washington that we're not getting involved in that. We're not going to stop the looting. We're not doing police work. That's not what we're here for. And I think –

MR. FERGUSON: So there were explicit instructions from Washington to not interfere with the looting?

MS. : Yes.

MR. : Hospitals, government offices, universities, ministries, one CPA estimate had the cost of the looting at \$12 billion. That was the revenue for Iraq in 2003-2004.

MR. : I picked up a newspaper today and I couldn't believe it. I read eight headlines that talked about chaos, violence, unrest, and it just was Henny Penny, the sky is falling.

MR. : Just imagine the room, the suite that we're sitting in, all that you have is concrete walls. Everything is gone.

MS. : We're talking people coming with industrial cranes and walking off with parts of a power plant.

MR. : Think what's happened in our cities when we've had riots and problems and looting. Stuff happens.

(End video segment.)

MR. KATULIS: Stuff happens. Charles, I wanted to ask you – this is a question – when I went into Iraq the first time in June of 2003, and we went around and talked to many Iraqis, many Iraqis' perception at that time, at that early moment – had this perception that this was part of a plan, the looting, the whole host of issues, that this was intentional, that we – the Americans were doing this to us. This was a dominant perception we heard throughout the southern and central part of Iraq, less so in the northern Kurdish regions.

When you filmed the movie, was that perception still there, and what's your best guess of where Iraqi perceptions are now? You never get a second chance to make a good first impression, as people say. And I think your film captures how pivotal some of these early decisions were. The question is was this just poor planning or was there some sort of real design behind it? And then second, have we done anything as a country to rehabilitate this, in your view?

MR. FERGUSON: Well, first as to what was going on at the time, I don't think, and there's no evidence, that the administration, Secretary Rumsfeld, wanted Iraq to be destroyed, but there was apparently a deliberate decision not to do anything about the fact

that Iraq was, in fact, being destroyed. And I have tried, and a number of people have tried, but I've tried and I'm a persistent individual. I have tried very hard to find out exactly what happened and I have not been able to succeed.

I've gotten a certain distance. I was able to find out, for example, that CENTCOM planners prepared an order which would have, in effect, declared martial law. It wouldn't have been a legal declaration of martial law, which by the way, the Pentagon was resisting because of the obligations under international law that such a formal declaration would have entailed.

But there was an order prepared by CENTCOM planners at – ordered by Tommy Franks to prepare the order, which would have, in effect, declared martial law. For reasons that I have been unable to discover, that order was never issued. It does seem clear that the Pentagon and Secretary Rumsfeld, in particular, did not want much to be done about maintaining order, and they seem to have underestimated both the extent and impact of what occurred.

As to Iraqi perceptions, I think that there is still a widespread view in Iraq, and also in general in the Arab world, that much or all of what America does, America does intentionally, and that there is some grand plan behind it. But I think that by now, and it's been my personal experience that many Iraqis, especially educated Iraqis, by now have gradually, painfully come to realize that we just fucked up.

And in some ways, I think that in Iraqi perceptions, that is for them an even more dispiriting realization, that we really can't do it. And it's made a number of Iraqis that I speak with very desperate and sad and then fatalistic. And some of them say, "The United States should pull out because, yes, if the United States pulls out, yes, there will be a horrible bloodbath, but you're so incompetent. You'll never get it right anyway."

MR. KATULIS: Right. Well, we should start to tee up the second clip, but a brief follow-up. Have we done anything in the last year or so, do you think, given there have been changes, obviously, on the ground and in the discussions with those whom you may have interviewed a few years ago, do you think we've restored in any way, or is that still the dominant view of the U.S., that we've screwed things up royally?

MR. FERGUSON: Well, Iraq is certainly not a paradise now. I haven't been personally back to Iraq since I was there in 2006. I have recently interviewed a very large number of people, Americans and Iraqis, involved in the current situation. And there seems to be a cautious halting optimism that maybe violence is sustainably reduced, and that maybe there's something bubbling up from below, people beginning to get tired of killing each other, maybe.

MR. KATULIS: We have a second clip here. Maybe you could tell us what we're about to see.

MR. FERGUSON: One of the most pivotal decisions, many people think, the most pivotal made by the early American occupation, and in the view of many people, the decision that had the largest effect in creating the insurgency was L. Paul Bremer's decision, which he made in Washington, D.C. in May of 2003 before he had even been to Iraq for the first time, and he made it secretly without consulting anyone and it stunned everybody in Iraq.

The United States military was preparing to recall 10 divisions of the Iraqi Army to help keep order in Iraq. It was a decision to disband the entire Iraqi military infrastructure, the entire national security infrastructure of Iraq, the Iraqi Army, the Special Republican Guard, the Republican Guard, the Fedayeen Saddam, and other paramilitary forces, and the Ministry of Defense, a decision that was formally announced on May 23<sup>rd</sup> of 2003, with, by the way, President Bush being notified only the evening before that the decision was being made.

(Begin video segment.)

MR. : The Iraqi Army was essentially standing there, waiting. They were waiting for an overture. They were waiting for what they thought would happen, that someone would come to them and say, this is the fight and you're integral to that plan and we need you. No one ever did that.

MR. : When the war was over, when the major maneuver fighting was over, there were simply no units still in existence. Everybody had gone home.

MR. : Generals and commanders were coming back with entire divisions saying, "Here are my people."

MR. : One of the Iraqi officers, towards the end of – I don't know – the second or third meeting, when Baghdad was going – it was in chaos, said "Colonel Paul, I can have 10,000 military policeman for you next week; you just tell me." I took that back to Bernie Kerik's staff and nothing was done with it.

MR. : Five days after Bremer issued his order, we were farewelling Jay Garner because he was going to leave Iraq for good the next day. We had two Humvees on the highway heading out from the green zone and they were ambushed and two soldiers were killed. And that was when, in my mind, the insurgency began.

MR. : My colleagues and I could sit on the balcony or on the roof of the Republican Palace at night and we could watch the tracers throughout Baghdad, and we could watch the flares of different colors that went up marking where American convoys of certain compositions were moving and being followed by the insurgents.

MR. : These guys all knew where those munitions were. They knew how to get to those weapons and how to use them. And you've just sent them away and said, they don't exist. Common sense tells me you don't do that.

MR. : You had huge ammunition dumps that weren't guarded until several weeks, if not a couple of months, after major combat actions ended.

MR. : I'm standing there watching these insurgents pull out rockets and mortars and bombs from these weapons caches that the Iraqis had stored – stashed everywhere. And you go to the British or to the U.S., whoever's there, with your little GPS receiver and say, "Hey, guys, we found like 18,000 million tons of bombs and there're a bunch of Iraqis there with AK-47s taking it away; probably not the best idea. Here's where it's located." And they say to you, "We just don't have enough people to cover it." I couldn't believe it. It wasn't the right answer. Go there and take care of it for your security, for the civilian security, for everybody. It's just a bad idea.

(End video segment.)

MR. KATULIS: Here we are five years later since the start of the war, and I was at a discussion recently with Iraq's minister of defense. And I asked him, "What percent of your current force served in the previous Iraqi Army?" He said, "Probably about 70 or 80 percent." And clearly, your film depicts this and many other excellent works have talked about how this was a serious mistake.

I'm curious, to try to carry our conversation a little bit forward to the present, what you make of the U.S. efforts, in a sense, to make up for some of these past mistakes, the efforts to build an Iraqi Army, and then most recently, a key part of the surge has been to work with new types of militias, for lack of a better description, that concern local citizens and other things. What's your view on these attempts and do you think they'll succeed? Where are things headed in your view in trying to correct some of these mistakes?

MR. FERGUSON: That is the \$64 billion question or the \$2 trillion question. Last night, actually, I was at a meeting with Larry Wilkerson, who appears in film, Paul Hughes, Nir Rosen, who – Nir has just come back from a month in – two months in Iraq, principally in Baghdad, studying exactly this question. And he has an article about it in the current issue of *Rolling Stone*, a very interesting article.

And I've asked them, I've asked many other people, these questions, and there seems to be a wide spectrum of opinion. I'm not entirely surprised, but a little bit scared at how wide the spectrum of opinion is, ranging from something very good is, in fact, happening. It needs more time. It's not settled yet. It still is risky and tentative and imperfect and unstable, but it does appear as if there's a growing institutional stability and aversion to violence in the country.

And the Iraqi security forces, who now, by the way, are larger than they were under Saddam, are gradually, painfully becoming somewhat more professional and competent, reliable. Paul Hughes advanced that view yesterday. And then, Nir Rosen thinks it's just hopeless, and I've heard that and I've heard everything in between.

And when I ask people what'll happen if the Americans leave, some people say, it's going to be an utter, total bloodbath on the scale of Rwanda and immediately, instantly, a million people will die practically overnight. And then other people think that it'll be okay, that there'll be perhaps a short temporary spike in violence, but that our withdrawal will force people and enable people to negotiate with each other in ways that they previously were not able to.

Your guess is as good as mine.

MR. KATULIS: Now, we're here to talk a little bit about your new book, *No End in Sight: Iraq's Descent into Chaos*. Why did you feel it was necessary to do this book? What's your goal? What are you trying to inject into the public sphere that you weren't able to do with this particular film?

MR. FERGUSON: I tried to do two things. The first concerns the past and the film is about the past. The film is about why all this happened, how this came to be. And the film contains less than 1 percent of the material that I gathered in the course of making the film. I did not make the film efficiently. I made the film indulging my policy-wonk past, and we interviewed an enormous – and I interviewed an enormous number of people. And we have – I don't know – 200 hours of footage in the United States and another 50 or 100 hours of footage from Iraq.

And so – and that constitutes an extraordinary oral history, in effect, of what happened between mid 2002 and 2006. And I wanted that to be placed out in the world in a way that makes it irrefutable and thorough. And so this book has more than probably many people want to know about exactly how the Iraqi Army was disbanded and exactly what its consequences were and what people thought and said. That was the first goal in doing this.

The second was to bring material up-to-date and to examine the current and future situation. And I don't advance an opinion. What I do is I quote extensively from interviews of many intelligent, well intentioned people, who have a very wide spectrum of views about what the current situation is and what should be done.

MR. KATULIS: Great. Now, I know we have the book available after the event. I wanted – before we open it up to questions, to ask one particular part of the book – I've been making my way through it and I think it's a great resource. And chapter nine, I think, is particularly good on the insurgency, militias, and sectarian violence.

And I wanted to ask you about your interviews with the head of the Badr Organization because I wanted to highlight this in our discussion today because these militias, these organizations, both Shiite and now some of the Sunni militias, really continue to be a big part of the landscape in Iraq. As you said, it's a very complicated situation. Many people have different views, whether it's Paul Hughes' view on the security forces or Nir Rosen's, as you've been discussing about your event last night.

What was it like interviewing Hadi? What kind of leader was he? I think your book alludes to this and as you're seeing things play out on the ground, particularly in 2007 and 2008, what role are militias like the Badr Organization playing over there?

MR. FERGUSON: Hadi al Amiri is a very scary man. It's one of the few times in my life, and I would say the most striking personal element, the most striking time in my life, when I really felt that I was face to face with evil of a really deep kind. I felt like I was interviewing Adolf Hitler in 1936.

MR. KATULIS: But his militia is affiliated with some of the leading parties in Iraq.

MR. FERGUSON: Yes, he's head of the Badr Organization renamed from the Badr Brigade in order to try to sanitize itself. And it's associated with the party that used to be called SCIRI, which has also renamed itself, formerly Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and now was it –

MR. KATULIS: The Supreme Islamic Iraq Council.

MR. FERGUSON: Yes.

MR. KATULIS: No more revolution.

MR. FERGUSON: No more – exactly. I think their view correctly being the revolution's over and we did. And it was interesting, in 2006, al Amiri's immediate personal subordinates, the people who bring him tea, they're terrified of him, absolutely terrified. And our translator, not the interpreter who was with me at the time, but our translator later, who looked at the footage and translated it for us when we were making the film, remarked in his translation – he wrote in parenthesis, "This reminds me of Saddam time." And yes, these militias are – they're very scary things.

MR. KATULIS: And do you see them playing a dominant role still in Iraq or as you follow the situation?

MR. FERGUSON: It's complicated. In the South, it appears they run the place, but no one of them runs the place. There's the Fadhila Party. There's the Badr Organization. There's the Mahdi Army. And then there's a large number of smaller, but still scary militias, all contending for power in the South quite violently. They're all Shiite. Many people – and Nir Rosen said this to me yesterday – many people I've spoken with recently think that the worst violence that could occur upon an American drawdown or withdrawal would be Shiite-on-Shiite violence for control of the South. And much of this is about money and power and really has little to do with ideology.

And so there's that and then there's a different story in Baghdad, but there also, I encountered a wide spectrum of opinion about whether enough ethnic cleansing – a rather bizarre discussion – whether enough ethnic cleansing and violence has – and people

fleeing has already occurred, so that there's enough separation, that there isn't much violence left to occur if we leave, versus those like, for example, like Joost Hiltermann, Mideast director for the International Crisis Group, who thinks that there still is enough mixture and potential conflagration that Baghdad could turn very violent if we pull out.

MR. KATULIS: When you hear these discussions and you take part in them, what's your sense in terms of where things may land in 2009, given what you see the presidential candidates proposing, the Bush administration's policy? Where will be if we bring you back here a year from now in Iraq?

MR. FERGUSON: Well, first of all, we're still going to be in Iraq a year from now. If we decided to withdraw from Iraq today, which obviously, we're not deciding, but if we decided to withdraw from Iraq today, it would take 18 months to two years to get us out for purely logistical reasons, never mind anything political. It's – we've built up an extraordinarily large complex infrastructure there and the Army, unlike the Marine Corps, it takes a long time for the Army to leave a place, unless it's just going to abandon everything – so first of all that.

Secondly, I think that no matter what the presidential candidates say now, they're all intelligent people. All three of these people are intelligent people and at some level, practical people, and I think that when they find themselves sitting in the Oval Office in 2009, they are going to be very sober and very scared and very tentative about anything they do.

And Iraq is such an unstable, unpredictable place. I would say that's what worries me the most. It's that it's so difficult to know and no three of those people, no president of the United States, can have direct personal knowledge of the situation. It's not possible. They can't go there physically. Nobody they talk to is going to tell them the complete truth.

And one thing that worries me a lot actually is getting direct, unfiltered, unbiased information to them, which is uninflected by personal agendas. And I would say to be – forgive me – very blunt, the majority of the American political class is, I think, dangerously unobjective about the situation, the policy-wonk class.

I had dinner a while ago with Zbigniew Brzezinski and he told me for 20 minutes in this just terribly authoritative way what was going on in Iraq. He doesn't have the faintest fucking idea of what's going on in Iraq. Excuse my vulgarity. And because of that, these people are not going to be able to be objective and clear or knowledgeable about this incredibly complicated situation. And that worries me a lot.

MR. KATULIS: Well, thank you again –

MR. FERGUSON: Sorry.

MR. KATULIS: – for the film and the book. I think again, it's an excellent resource and it's available back there. What I'd like to do is open up our discussion to our guests. And I'd like to start with any members of the news media, if we have any, who would like to ask a question. If not, I think we have a roving mike. If you could state your name and if you have an affiliation, share it with us up here and the rest of the audience.

Q: Jay Berstein of *Huffington Post*. Very little in the media, it seems to me, but perhaps I've missed something, has been made of the intrinsic interest that congressional districts and the businesses, the industries within those districts have in maintaining American presence in Iraq, in Afghanistan and other places around the world. To what extent, in the research that you did for your film, or things that you uncovered since – to what extent are congressional politicians, or politicians generally, incapable or unwilling to withdraw support because it's in their best interest to keep the jobs alive in those industries, in their congressional districts that are profiting from American involvement in the war?

MR. FERGUSON: Well, I guess, first I would say it's not a subject that I studied extensively. I every now and then encountered discussion of those kinds of issues and I've certainly spoken directly with a number of representatives and senators about their views and their sense of their constituents' political and economic sensitivities. I don't think that it's a terribly important factor. It's a factor that exists, but I think that a much more important factor, for example, is the number of their constituents and constituents' families who are serving in the military or have family members serving the military, and the effect that that has on what they think of the situation. Do you want to add something to it, Brian?

MR. KATULIS: Well, I agree with Charles that it's probably a minor calculation in the broader scope of things. I think trying to understand what is happening on the ground in Iraq and making decisions about what we might do as a result of any policy move is complicated enough because there are many actors, the intra-Iraqi battles that continue to this day, the regional impact that countries neighboring Iraq have on those countries – so on the dynamics inside of Iraq.

So I think if it is a factor, it's probably a minor factor. I don't think it's the thing that drives congressional policy. I think many people in Congress, like many people in the government, career individuals are just trying to understand what is happening and what might happen if we necessarily need to drawdown our troop levels, which we're beginning to do as we speak, in part because we're making a virtue out of necessity. We need to do because of the military readiness crisis. So I agree.

Q: Hi, I'm Laurie Eyam (sp). I'm a freelance reporter for the Deutsche Welle and I guess I've two questions. One of them is in terms of the Iraqi refugees, those hearings on the Hill. There is – I guess there's – I forget – (unintelligible) – like 500 (pieces?) to get people in who are working with the U.S. in some way. And I'm wondering what is happening in terms of the people who are trying to get out, who were

working with the U.S. and probably have received death threats, what your sense is and what's happening with that. And is there a sense of despair of Iraqis who work with Americans who may be trapped there?

And then the other question is several refugees did return and what have you heard has happened to them? Are they able to go home or they're actually resettling into other areas? And in terms of the situation for ordinary Iraqis, some of the concerns that people had expressed were about being able to take their kids to school because of fears of kidnapping. Are schools – is schooling still going forward or is there a lost generation?

MR. KATULIS: And I know you've interviewed people in your movie who have since become refugees, including Omar from the *Washington Post* who's in California, I understand. What's your sense of these baskets of issues?

MR. FERGUSON: Well, first, as to U.S. behavior with regard to the refugee situation, it's difficult to know or to say what the worst, most despicable scandal with regard to Iraq is. But this certainly ranks pretty high. The United States government has done nothing for these people, nothing, nothing. Sweden has admitted 10 times as many people – 10 times as many Iraqis as the United States has since 2003. And 20 percent of the population of Iraq is now either foreign refugees or internally displaced.

And a very large number of those people are in danger because they worked for the Americans or in some way were associated with Western organizations. Working for a western journalist, for example, working for a western journalistic organization is not a life-expectancy-enhancing thing to do in Iraq. A very large number of Iraqi journalists have been killed, over 100 since 2003, in some cases because they worked for the Western press – a horrible situation.

George Packer just wrote a play about this which is playing in New York, which I'm going to see. His translator, who was my translator, is himself – I wouldn't call him a refugee. He's on a Fulbright here in the United States. Fourteen members of his family have been killed, most recently, his father. He resettled with George's assistance. George got *The New Yorker* to pay for the resettlement of his family, his remaining family, which is now in Damascus doing nothing.

As to your question about recent returns of refugees, there have been a number of press reports about this. When I – I've asked Nir Rosen about this a number of times. Nir is a somewhat predictably dogmatically leftist guy, and I don't always trust his general judgments about things, but his detailed factual knowledge is unparalleled. He's probably spent more time in Iraq since 2003 than any other human being and he speaks Arabic.

And he says that there have been very few returns. The returns that there have been have been forced primarily by economic necessity. People go to Jordan; they go to Syria. They can't get jobs; they run out of money. They sell all their belongings and

then they have to go back. And the majority of those who go back are unable to return to their homes and become internally displaced people.

Jordan and Syria have now closed their borders and eight Iraqi provinces have closed their internal borders to people trying to leave their homes and go elsewhere in Iraq. And one of the things that concerns me, and concerns those people who are most pessimistic about the future, is the possibility that that will lead to more violence.

As to your question about daily life, daily life in Iraq now is horrible, and it's amazing that people can get anything done whatsoever. It's – daily life is – you can't begin to imagine what daily life is like.

MR. KATULIS: And if I could add, the refugee problem is a problem that will be with us for a long time. We had a conference here in December. You can get the transcripts and the video of that to discuss this issue. And it's not only a humanitarian issue. We have more than four million displaced, two million outside of the country, two inside.

I think thinking ahead of the curve, 2010, 2011, it is a political issue. When people talk about a so-called political solution to Iraq's conflict and we talk about that too, this is a factor. And I think the starting presumption of many Iraqis is they would like to go back to their homes, but at this stage, it seems inconceivable, given what happened in 2006 and 2007 when the surge happened. So there comes a question where these displaced people start putting political pressure on countries like Syria or Jordan, or putting political pressure on their leaders inside of Iraq. And it's an issue that is not going away. Sir?

Q: Hi, I'm Peter Katel from the *Congressional Quarterly*. There is an effort underway now by opponents of the war to draw attention to the amount that it costs. And apart from what the real numbers are, if anybody knows them, I'm curious what you saw, if anything, in the course of your reporting, about the – I guess the quality or the management of U.S. spending. And I don't know how systematically you examined it.

Number two, you mentioned the American president, whoever it might be, who is not really going to know what's going on in Iraq, but the president might know, or might be able to know, what's being spent. And I'm wondering what you think – how big a factor that'll be in encouraging or persuading him or her to stay longer, get out as quickly as possible, or whatever.

MR. FERGUSON: Well, the – it's difficult for me to judge what political impact the economic cost of the war will be for the next administration. There's some reasons to believe it'll be substantial, particularly if we're in a significant recession, which many people think that we will be. So I certainly don't discount it as a factor.

As to the wisdom of financial management of spending in Iraq up to this point, I would assume that everybody here in this crowd knows about the \$12 million in \$100

bills, for example. How many people don't know about that? (Laughter.) Okay, all right. So people know. And I would assume that most people here know about \$1.4 billion stolen by the defense minister who then lived openly in London for six months, and then under increasing pressure, had to move to Jordan where he now lives contentedly with his \$1.4 billion. So it's difficult to say much that's favorable about the early management of the occupation of Iraq, and certainly financially, it was very much in keeping with the rest.

MR. KATULIS: And I think the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction has just touched the tip of the iceberg. We talked to people in OMB and other agencies who are trying to get a handle on how the money – how much money is going out and how much is actually being spent. And it's not an easy task to get a clear and straight answer. And I think the ranges are now upwards of \$12 billion a months that's being spent in Iraq.

Q: Will the president find out? He or she –

MR. KATULIS: I think so, the president could find out if he wanted to. This is part of the problem of the murkiness. And I think it's not only with Iraq, but it's our broader defense and national security effort, that there really – we're spending a lot of money in a lot of places, but we're not necessarily getting the sorts of clear results or input delivers what source of outputs at this stage. And I think 110<sup>th</sup> Congress is doing a little bit better job than the 109<sup>th</sup>, but there's certainly always room for improvement. Next question, in the back.

Q: Hi, I'm Fran Middleberg from Military Families Speak Out. What is the prevailing opinion right now about why we're not leaving and what is the scenario where we might withdraw?

MR. KATULIS: You're giving that one to me? (Laughter.) Well, I think on your first question – I think if you look at, for instance, the recent poll that *USA Today* had, the American public still is deeply conflicted in a broad sense. There's not one vision in terms of what is happening in Iraq, as we've discussed before, or what should happen necessarily. And I think there's been a growing consensus for change. And you saw this in the midterm elections in 2006, that we need to put an end to our military engagement for a whole host of reasons. And there are strong arguments for that.

But I still think that there is – it's a complicated issue that deserves much more of an in-depth debate, rather than the political debate that you hear, whether it's from the Right saying the Left is waving the white flag of surrender, or the Left saying that they just want to warmonger it. And I think there's room in the middle to discuss some pretty complicated policy initiatives.

And your second question – remind me what it was.

Q: What might be the scenario –

MR. KATULIS: Well, there're a number of different scenarios, and I think people at organizations like ours and other think-tanks around town, are really thinking through it. The military is certainly thinking through it and different government agencies. We have a plan which is available on our website called "Strategic Reset," which calls for a phased redeployment of troops with a date certain, but intensifying the diplomatic, political, and economic efforts.

Now, all of this is wrapped up in the context of Iraq, as complex as it is. And you don't know what will happen once you make one move or another. So this is why I think the broader public debate – I think there's a lot of, I think, strong arguments for staying, strong arguments, in my view, for actually leaving sooner rather than later, but it's tied to a very complicated situation that all of the caricatures, I think, that were portrayed by conservatives and President Bush in particular, that freedom and democracy was going to defeat the forces of terrorism hit cold hard reality on the ground in Iraq and continues to hit that difficult reality. I don't know if you want to add something to that, Charles.

MR. FERGUSON: I guess the only thing that I would say is that if I am able to extract a center of gravity from the conversations I've had recently, I would say that it's close to something like this. Try to negotiate with everybody and try to get everybody who's important to start talking to each other with our permission and assistance, including people we don't like, like the Iranians and the Syrians, people we don't like with, I would say, in some cases, very good reason. But nonetheless, we have to speak with them because they have power and they're important to the result. And try to withdraw and see what happens, but be prepared for the possibility that some of the things that might start to happen might not be so nice.

MR. KATULIS: I think that's right. I think it's a very complicated issue and I think – again, we're of the mind at the center here that the sooner our troops leave, and the more that we focus on other aspects of American power that could be brought to bear, the better. And all of these things, getting the different political actors to talk to each other inside of Iraq, is all easier said than done, particularly given the still high levels of violence that are happening in the country. Sir?

Q: Dan Lieberman. Yes, we talk about moving out, but it's obvious we have the largest U.S. embassy and complex there. We have semi-permanent, not permanent, military bases all over the country, and the U.S. person personnel are very involved in both the reconstruction and the operation of much of the infrastructure. So I really can't see the logistics so easily. And not only are we there, but we're going to have to protect while we're there. It seems that rather than moving out, that Iraq will become the 51<sup>st</sup> state before then. (Laughter.)

MR. FERGUSON: Thank you for your kindness in letting me answer this question. Well, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad is certainly quite something to behold. I haven't been there since April of 2006, but even in April of 2006, I saw the construction and just the construction was quite awe-inspiring. I would say that 50 percent of the

construction effort that was going on in Iraq was that embassy, but I don't think that the existence of a very large embassy that might turn into a very large piece of unsalable real estate is going to determine whether or not the United States withdraws.

The more complicated question, of course, is the way the U.S. military is marbled throughout the functioning or nonfunctioning of Iraq now, and that is indeed an extremely complicated question. Do you want to –

MR. KATULIS: I think a big part of it, in our American debate, going back to another question there, is understanding how much leverage and control we really actually do have, even with such large numbers of troops on the ground. My experience even in 2003-2004, when our presence was quite high and our strategy was different, we didn't really shape and control events in a way that we think we might have or that debates in Washington might have.

And I think we're still stuck in that similar moment where there's a sum cost. We've invested so much in this. And if we can just stay a little bit longer and get it a little bit more right – and I fear that we don't have that ability to understand the complexities of the different intra-Iraqi actors, that we need to start fading to the background to see what they can do to shape their own destiny. It might not look pretty. It may be very difficult to manage, but I think we're still stuck in how much do we stay engaged? The embassy is one vestige of this, the large bases and a whole host of other things.

But I think if you look at dynamics in Iraq, I think a lot of analysts agree that decentralization, or at least the power struggles, really have been pushed down to local areas and the sense of having such a large presence in the central part of Baghdad, in that embassy which is as large as the Vatican City, makes a little sense to me that if the U.S. wants to stay engaged, perhaps reducing its footprint in a major way would be good, but then being involved with these provincial reconstruction teams and other things around the country because that's, to my knowledge, where the action really is happening, where a lot of the deals over power are going to be cut.

MR. FERGUSON: And let me just interject one brief comment, which is that Brian is, in my experience, distressingly unusual in that he has actually been to Iraq a number of times and – and the microphone failed again – and I think that now, more than ever, direct first-person knowledge is – thank you – (inaudible) – now more than ever, direct first-person knowledge is, I think, essential to understanding what the United States should and can do.

MR. KATULIS: Great. We have one question in the back on the right.

Q: I'll just stand up and yell. My name is Cark Osgood. I represent the (intelligence community?). We hear a lot about the trauma and the health effects that have been affected on American soldiers that serve in Iraq, but what I'd like to know

about is Iraqis, the trauma that has been – can you comment on the trauma that has been imposed on Iraqis by what's happened and the loss of – (inaudible)?

MR. FERGUSON: Yes, I can comment on that. I am constantly amazed when I see Iraqis who've been through so much who can function at all and many of them can. It's a testament to human spirit that if half a dozen members of your family have been killed, if you yourself have been kidnapped, if you've been followed, if your house has been violently searched by American forces and you've been arrested and detained, you know that you can still function. But – and I know – I've dealt with people who've had all those things happen, as I'm sure Brian has, and anybody who spends time there and works on this issue encounters that. It's impossible to avoid.

But it's not that these people are unaffected, and I do notice in their personal dealings and in their political views that their personal trauma has affected them – and microphones seem to have returned. So – and the level of trauma is – one question that I asked almost every Iraqi that I encountered in Iraq, and that I still ask when I speak with Iraqis here is, "Have you had members of your family who've been kidnapped or killed?" And now I no longer ask that question. I ask how many because everybody has had members of the family who've been kidnapped or killed. And it's – yes, of course, it affects you.

MR. KATULIS: Yes, I don't think we – (laughter) – it's working now. I got it. Yes, I don't think we have a good understanding of the scale of the devastation. I was at a conference last Friday where I met somebody I knew in Iraq five years ago and I had not seen him since then, and his brother had been detained by one of these militias. And the personal devastation in terms of death, health crises, people displaced – but this individual maintained – what I find interesting – a sense of hope that in the long run, things have got to get better because there's still a deep love and appreciation for their country. This is where they lived and grew up, and I think this is what makes the challenges of trying to get Iraq right, whatever that means, all the more pressing and important.

I think we had one more question – a couple of more questions back here.

Q: Hi. I'm Mohammed Albasha, Yemen Embassy. My question for you, sir, who do you personally pick a candidate to be a replacement of Admiral Fallon at CENTCOM? Do you think it's a good time for Petraeus perhaps to come back and head the CENTCOM? Thank you.

MR. FERGUSON: I have no comment on the issue. Do you have a –

MR. KATULIS: I don't have a terribly strong opinion on it, though it is an important position and it would be good to have somebody who's professional and knows – has a good knowledge of the area, because we're talking about not just Iraq and Iran, but also Pakistan. And certainly, Admiral Fallon had those qualifications and he left under the circumstances that everybody understands why he left.

MR. FERGUSON: What do you think about Petraeus?

MR. KATULIS: Well, I think Petraeus – he’s interviewing me – (laughter).

MR. FERGUSON: It’s fun. (Laughter.)

MR. KATULIS: He certainly has a long experience on the ground, given his now three tours of duty inside of Iraq, but it would be controversial in my view, not only in the public sphere, but inside the Pentagon, there’s a great deal of debate, as you all know, or those who follow the Pentagon, over his role on a whole host of episodes. And some of my colleagues highlight the role he played in 2004 in writing an op-ed a few weeks before the presidential election, talking about how well the training of the Iraqi security forces went.

But he certainly has served the country and has done some – I think tried to do some interesting things, but I think it’s anyone’s guess at this point, but having somebody who knows the region really well would be good.

Q: Dave Oxtter, Research Institute for Independent Living. There was a reference in Senator Reed’s document about destroying a global al Qaeda. And my question is what progress has been made in that effort since 9/11?

MR. KATULIS: Well, Charles, you take it.

MR. FERGUSON: Well, I’m not the person to ask about al Qaeda on a global level and certainly, not al Qaeda in Afghanistan or Pakistan. I’ve never been to either country. And I’ve come to have an even greater respect than I previously did for first-person direct experience.

With regard to Iraq, I would say the majority of the people that I speak with, not all by any means, but the majority of the people that I speak with feel that if the United States were not present in Iraq, al Qaeda in Iraq would not exist. Do you have a comment on that?

MR. KATULIS: Well, I think I would direct you, if you go on the web, to look at DNI.gov and just look at the national intelligence estimates that came out recently on the global terror threat, and here, if you’re looking for, as best as we can get, objective perspectives in terms of how this is going.

The heads of our intelligence agencies, just last month, testified on Capitol Hill and they said, “This is not going very well,” in part because al Qaeda has reestablished the headquarters for training and for operations in that border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, not Iraq again.

And a previous national intelligence estimate has talked about how the war in Iraq has actually been a boon for al Qaeda in terms of fundraising and recruitment and a whole host of other things. So I think this will be part of our national debate in 2008. It should be. How well have we spent this more than one trillion dollars in the last seven years to try to make America safer and I think it's an important debate to be had.

I think we have time for two more questions.

Q: I wanted to – my name is Jonathan Turk (sp). I wanted to ask about the militias you referred to. Would you more accurately classify them as loosely affiliated gangs with gang leaders, or groups of 1,000 and more members with discipline and ranking that would be more accurately led by warlords? And do you see a viable way to make them non-violent stakeholders in future Iraqi society?

MR. FERGUSON: It's a very good question. The answer changes over time and the answer at the moment, I would say, is a mixture of all of the above, that there are large relatively disciplined groups. There are also many splinter groups and there's a lot of evidence that Moqtada al-Sadr right now is having a lot of trouble controlling the Mahdi Army and that there are many subunits within the Mahdi Army that, for either religious or ideological reasons on the one hand, or a significant motive, pure greed, on the other, just – they want to run this neighborhood and they want to occupy all the empty houses in the neighborhood. And they want to blackmail everybody in the neighborhood. That goes on a lot.

So it's a very complicated situation and there are many extreme religious smaller militias, particularly in the South, and then there are these concerned local citizens groups that the United States has created who now number in total about 80,000. And they are relatively decentralized and some people have told me that they think that if and when the United States pulls out or stops supporting them, and they are not – and they've not been integrated into a disciplined Iraqi security force, that they will start killing each other before they start killing other Shiites for control of neighborhoods and money.

And thus, up to this point, there does not seem to have been much interest on the part of the Iraqi government to integrate these Sunni militias into Iraqi security forces and give them any credibility or discipline or legitimacy. And that's of concern and I think it's very unclear what's going to happen to the Mahdi Army over time.

MR. KATULIS: We have a report on our website about the – (unintelligible) – we've written with some of our colleagues about the nature of it and where to go and mostly analyzing what has happened so far. And I think it's really hard. Well, in our view, it makes the security situation even more complex, that in fact, what may have been the best of intentions from colonels or others operating in the field to work with certain Sunni groups has essentially resulted in creating yet another militia group that is not – does not hold allegiance to the Iraqi government, which is the bigger problem. We could

very well be arming up different sides of Iraq's civil wars and this sort of support, in the long run, may not lead to a sustainable solution.

I think we have time for one more question. Let's go down in front here.

Q: My name is Lynn Olson (sp). I'd like to go back to the question of refugees and I want to know if you can tell us what is the public reasoning for not accepting more Iraqis into this country who have helped us and what could be going on underneath? What's the private reason? Why in the world are we behaving the way we are?

MR. FERGUSON: Well, I can't say that I have authoritative or direct knowledge of why we're behaving the way that we are, but I do have a hypothesis, and it's not a pleasant one. I think that there are two reasons. One is, I just have to say that there is no evidence that the Bush administration's primary concern is the welfare of the people of Iraq. And that's evident in the way refugees are treated. It's evident in many aspects of U.S. policy since 2003.

And the second factor, which I think is actually – I suspect, I have no knowledge, but I suspect is a significant factor – it's politics. If the United States admitted into the United States, let's say, a quarter million Iraqi refugees, there would then be a quarter million people running around the United States who know what really happened in Iraq and they would talk about it. And I don't think the Bush administration likes that idea.

MR. KATULIS: If I could add – in the Strategic Reset report, we proposed a level of 100,000 Iraqis, letting them into the country. And then some of the public events where my colleague, Larry Korb, or I have talked about this, we sometimes get a pushback from people who don't like immigrants, period, that the issue – and immigration is a hot button issue.

MR. FERGUSON: There's that too.

MR. KATULIS: We get a very angry, "how could we let these people in" sort of sentiment, and I think, like many things, there's a lot of room for education and deeper appreciation. And that's why I think what Charles has done with the film and now with this book is an excellent contribution to our public debate.

I encourage you to take a look at the book. I also encourage you to come to our future Iraq panel discussions because I think we'll have a really good set of events over the next five or six weeks. And I'd like you to join me in thanking Charles Ferguson for joining us today. (Applause.)

(END)