

Center for American Progress



“IRAQ: NEXT STEPS FOR U.S. POLICY”

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MORNING INTRODUCTION

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MR. JOHN PODESTA: Good morning. I'm John Podesta and on behalf of the Center for American Progress I want to thank you for getting here bright and early this morning and joining us today for this important event. This morning you'll hear from a wide array of distinguished experts and analysts on where we stand in Iraq and what we need to do next. And this afternoon in our luncheon keynote address, Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski will help us understand and confront some of the tough challenges America faces when it comes to our strategic approach to Iraq.

We are grateful to all our speakers today for their time and expertise and we will hear from them shortly, but before I turn the program over to our first panel I want to take a moment to say a few words about the challenges the United States faces in Iraq on the eve of the third anniversary of the war.

Today, the president's national security advisor, as you know, releases the president's new and improved national security strategy, and I think it's fair to say that it will give new meaning to the phrase "stay the course." But recent events in Iraq make clear that the Bush administration's stay-the-course strategy has failed to achieve progress and stabilize Iraq. Over the last three weeks, Iraq has edged closer to the brink of all-out sectarian civil war in a cycle of violence sparked by last month's bombing of a holy site: the mosque in Samarra.

Since that bombing, we have all seen the daily stream of reprisal attacks resulting in several hundred deaths, including the gruesome discovery by Iraqi police of the bodies of more than 80 men shot to death execution style, including 27 buried in a mass grave in a neighborhood in Baghdad.

Recent media reports out of Iraq have noted that Iraqis are forming their own neighborhood patrols and stockpiling weapons, fuel, and food in case things go from bad to worse. The lawlessness is further aggravated by sectarian and ethnic militias, which control entire neighborhoods in Iraq, even though they should have been disbanded two years ago according to an order never implemented by the Bush administration. These militias represent a challenge to the authority of Iraq's fledgling security forces that rivals the Sunni-dominated insurgency.

In addition to the security problems, Iraq continues to face many problems in its reconstruction. Oil production is stuck below pre-war levels and most Iraqis receive electricity in their homes for less than half the day. Last month, the U.S. Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction reported to Congress that the \$18 billion allocated for Iraq's reconstruction will run out before many initiatives are completed, leaving many projects aimed at delivering clean water and regular electricity to Iraqis undone.

In the midst of this chaos and lack of progress, a political vacuum looms. More than three months after its historic elections, Iraq lacks a permanent government as the leading political factions remain deadlocked in a dispute over who should become Iraq's next prime minister.

Earlier today in Baghdad, the new Iraqi parliament convened for the first time – briefly, I might add. The new Iraqi parliament has an historic opportunity to make the political compromises necessary to hold the country together, and while the United States should continue to support the efforts by Iraqi leaders to form a new government through diplomacy, it is Iraqi leaders, not the U.S. government, that must make the tough bargains to create a viable and unified state.

The truth is that the United States cannot afford to maintain the current course set by President Bush. The Bush administration's open-ended commitment to Iraq has weakened the U.S. at home and damaged our country abroad, and it must come to an end. Three years of a continuous American troop presence in Iraq has weakened U.S. ground forces and served as a rallying cry and a recruitment tool for al Qaeda.

A growing number of Americans understand the dangers of the Bush administration's stay-the-course strategy and an increasing number of political leaders in the United States are voicing their concern and opposition. Just yesterday, Congress announced the formation of a bipartisan commission headed by former Congressman Lee Hamilton and former Secretary of State Jim Baker to study the Iraq war and make policy recommendations. The fact that this commission was formed is just the most recent sign of a growing lack of confidence in the Bush administration's strategy in Iraq.

Four months ago, a bipartisan majority of 79 senators called on the president to put forward a strategy for the successful completion of the mission in Iraq and declared 2006 to be, quote, "a period of significant transition in Iraq for success." In the first three months of 2006, the Bush administration has yet to achieve much progress, and after more than a dozen high-profile speeches by the president he has failed to convince most Americans that he has a plan to make 2006 a year of significant transition in Iraq.

It's clear that the country needs new ideas and a new vision. Last fall, the Center issued a plan co-written by Larry Korb and Brian Katulis, who chairs this panel this morning, called *Strategic Redeployment: A Progressive Plan for Iraq and the Struggle Against Violent Extremists*. That plan calls for a phased reduction of U.S. troops in Iraq, with most U.S. forces redeploying from Iraq by the end of 2007. According to the plan, the timeline for a gradual drawdown of U.S. troops should be coupled with a more vigorous diplomatic and political engagement by the United States to work with Iraqi leaders and countries in the region to achieve a political and diplomatic solution to the problems facing Iraq.

The *Strategic Redeployment* plan argues for a timeline for a military drawdown. An exit strategy based on conditions on the ground is a recipe for quagmire. Not setting a timeline holds U.S. national security interests hostage to events on the ground and

conditions will not have a great chance of improving until Iraqi leaders and countries in the region understand that U.S. troops are not planning to stay there forever. A gradual drawdown is vital. It will enable U.S. forces to continue training Iraqi forces over the next year, providing crucial support as Iraq builds a new government.

The main message of the *Strategic Redeployment* plan is to refocus U.S. efforts on the larger war against global terrorist networks and shift from our current strategy, which is heavily focused on military solutions, and places more emphasis on other elements of American power, including its diplomatic, political, and economic power. The *Strategic Redeployment* plan calls on President Bush to personally lead a diplomatic initiative in the region to get all of Iraq's neighbors to play a more active role in supporting stability in Iraq and eradicating terrorist networks. It also advocates long-term support for Iraq's economic reconstruction, with recommendations on how the United States can work with the international community to finish the many reconstruction projects that have not been completed.

This plan has attracted attention and garnered traction on Capitol Hill from both progressives and conservatives as they grapple with what to do in Iraq and how to deal with the impact of Iraq on the U.S. military, the efforts to help Iraqis build a new government, and perhaps most importantly how to incorporate our efforts in Iraq into America's broader struggle against global terror networks.

But the plan also attracted attention because it went beyond the narrow debate of staying the course versus cutting and running. It recognizes that these extreme positions avoid the fundamental question the country should be debating: is our government using all of its powers effectively to defeat our country's enemies? I think the answer is a resounding no. And we hope that today's discussions will offer constructive ideas on how the U.S. can change the course in Iraq: change the course to better serve our core national security interests and put us on a path to a year of significant transition in Iraq, as the Senate asked for.

Now it's my pleasure to turn over the floor to Brian Katulis, the Center's director for democracy and public diplomacy – as I said, one of the co-authors of that plan – to introduce our first panel on the situation in Iraq and options for U.S. policy.