

June 26, 2008

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Matt Bennett, Sean Barney, and Scott Payne
RE: Taking the Fight to Our Enemies: A New Frame for the Iraq Debate

Overview

Despite the Bush administration's manifold failures in Iraq, conservatives suggest that those, like us, who believe it is imperative that we change course in Iraq are not serious in our commitment to national security, are consigned to surrender and defeat in the war on terrorism, and are prepared to pull the rug out from underneath those in uniform who are putting their lives on the line to keep America safe. As Vice President Cheney put it recently, the debate between the administration and its critics "poses one fundamental question on national security: who is serious about fighting and winning the war on terror, on every front." "The only way to lose this fight," he suggested, "is to quit. That would be an act of betrayal and dishonor."¹

In contrast to this pointed critique, progressives have offered a variety of loosely connected rationales for continuing to draw down our forces in Iraq: the war is costing too many American lives; it is diverting resources that could otherwise be spent at home; it is impairing our image abroad; the United States should not be in the business of policing a sectarian civil war; the Iraqi government is not doing its part and our patience ought not be unlimited; the war was based on a lie and should never have been fought in the first place.

All of these arguments have merit. But they do not—separately or together—amount to a clear and decisive rebuttal of the scurrilous charges that conservatives are making about our patriotism or about the deep resolve we share with our fighting men and women to win the war on terrorism and keep America secure and strong. The most effective means of blunting the conservative attacks is to make clear that our support for a drawdown is based not on any distaste for the use of force or weariness of war. Rather, it is based on a better, more realistic plan for taking the fight to our enemies and ensuring that this nation's interests—rather than the Bush legacy—are driving the decision-making. ***The progressive case for changing course in Iraq can and should be made on national security grounds.***

I. Progressives should frame their critique of Bush and McCain's reckless strategy in terms of American national security.

We believe that if advocates for a change of course make it clear that their approach to Iraq reflects a hard-headed, clear-eyed view of what it takes at this moment to keep America safe, the public will eagerly embrace plans for an honorable de-escalation of American involvement in Iraq. Consequently, we

recommend using a national security frame when making the case for a change of strategy in Iraq: ***Staying the course with the Bush-McCain policy in Iraq is a reckless strategy that jeopardizes American national security. To keep America secure and strong, both today and tomorrow, we must continue to draw down our forces in Iraq.***

We recommend using two central proof points in making the national security case for a change of course in Iraq: First, it is now abundantly clear that our real enemies—Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda and their allies—are resurgent in Afghanistan and once again in a position to threaten America at home, yet we currently do not have the forces we need to defeat them where they live and where they are strongest. Second, U.S. ground forces have become critically overextended, and if we do not reduce our troop presence in Iraq soon, we could do substantial, long-term damage to the Army and Marine Corps and, by extension, to American strength and security.

A. America's security is at risk because we haven't dedicated the resources necessary to defeat Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda and their allies where they pose the greatest threat.

President Bush and Senator McCain are recklessly consumed with Iraq, but in truth, Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda remain the greatest threat to America and its allies. Seven years after al Qaeda terrorists murdered more than 3,000 Americans, bin Laden is still at large and al Qaeda has reestablished a safe haven from which it is actively preparing to attack America. That safe haven is not in Mosul or Baghdad—it is on the Afghan-Pakistan ("Af-Pak") border, the most dangerous place in the world for the United States.

This assessment does not come from the President's critics; it comes from leaders in his own administration: the Director of the CIA has called al Qaeda operating in its safe haven along the Af-Pak border a "clear and present danger to ... the West in general and the U.S. in particular."² The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has stated flatly that al Qaeda is currently planning attacks against the United States from this safe haven.³ Even the President's Ambassador to Iraq told the Senate this spring that if he were forced to choose between fighting al Qaeda in Afghanistan or Iraq, he would "pick al Qaeda in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area."⁴ Listening to the President's own advisors, it is apparent how out of touch his stay the course strategy really is.

Despite this clear and present danger, large swaths of Afghanistan are slipping toward the grip of the Taliban and al Qaeda. Our military is playing the same game of "Whack-A-Mole" in Afghanistan that it once played in Iraq—our troops will flush the Taliban from an area, only to see them slip back in after our overstretched forces depart. This has yielded the same poor results and danger to U.S. troops that it did when we were doing this in Iraq. Indeed, the monthly U.S. death toll in Afghanistan is now actually *higher* than in Iraq, despite there being 120,000 more American troops in Iraq than in Afghanistan.

We know why this course is not succeeding: we simply do not have enough troops in Afghanistan. The U.S. military has made great strides since 9/11 in

understanding the requirements for waging an effective counterinsurgent war. One of the central “lessons learned” is that effective counterinsurgency operations require significant troop density. The Army/Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual that General Petraeus helped author sets the minimum effective force requirement at twenty counterinsurgent troops per 1,000 residents.⁵ Adding together U.S., NATO, Afghan Army, and Afghan Police troops, the current counterinsurgency force in Afghanistan is less than a third of the minimum force prescribed by the Petraeus manual.⁶

This shortfall is taking a serious toll, as our commanders have made startlingly clear: “No question, it is an under-resourced force,” said the recently departed U.S. commander, General Dan McNeil.⁷ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff agrees: “[W]e don’t have enough forces there to hold in a classic counterinsurgency.”⁸ ***The reason why the U.S. has not sent more troops to Afghanistan, despite pleas from commanders on the ground, is clear: there simply are no more troops to send, absent a drawdown in Iraq.***⁹

B. America’s strength is at risk because our military is dangerously overextended.

The next commander-in-chief will be constrained, as the present one should have been, by some simple math: we have a limited number of troops in our ground forces and a limited capacity to grow the size of these forces in the short run. The Army and Marine Corps believe they can increase in size by only about 7,000 soldiers and 5,000 marines per year, respectively.¹⁰ The only way to grow the force more quickly is a political non-starter: reinstating the draft.

America’s ground forces, which are sized for the peace of the post-Cold War 1990s, now have been operating at an unsustainable tempo for half a decade. This has resulted in a recruitment and retention crisis that threatens to unravel the Army, with junior and mid-level officers and high-quality enlisted troops leaving in record numbers, recruitment standards plummeting, chronic equipment shortages, training and preparation operations curtailed and a record number of troops kept on active duty against their wishes through the stop-loss program.¹¹ As many current and retired military leaders have warned, the Army is “out of balance,”¹² with readiness “being consumed as fast as we can build it.”¹³ The strain of multiple, rapid and difficult deployments is threatening the future leadership and effectiveness of the force.

To protect our national security, we simply must restore our land forces to a sustainable operational tempo. If we want to maintain the greatest military in human history, we cannot send troops back into combat five times in seven years without adequate rest, training and preparation. Moreover, it is critically important that we return to maintaining a “ready brigade” in reserve to protect America against contingencies that might emerge outside of Iraq and Afghanistan. The world is an increasingly dangerous place, and we must not be left without ground forces to protect our security or interests around the globe. ***To restore U.S. ground forces to full strength and to reestablish a ready brigade, we must continue the drawdown in Iraq.***

II. Progressives should offer a new way forward: a 50-50-50 plan to secure and strengthen America.

We can achieve both of the national security objectives outlined above—a renewed focus on fighting our al Qaeda enemies and a sustainable operational tempo for our ground forces—with a tough and smart policy that reduces the number of U.S. troops deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan (combined) from the current 170,000 to 100,000.¹⁴ The question is where to make the cuts.

We believe progressives should advocate a new policy of 50-50-50. This means increasing our troop commitment in Afghanistan to 50,000, as our field commanders have requested; cutting our troop level in Iraq to 50,000, in keeping with a new, more sensible objective there; and expanding the size of the Army by 50,000 troops, to meet any future threats that might arise.

50 for Afghanistan: As dangerous as it is today, Afghanistan could get far worse if we fail to act decisively. The massive Taliban and al Qaeda prison break in Kandahar this week¹⁵ was just the latest sign that the situation is deteriorating. There is now evidence that members of al Qaeda are actually leaving Iraq for Afghanistan, because they find it more fertile territory, given America's troop posture, for waging war against America and the West, and, due to the booming Afghan drug trade, for financing terrorism.¹⁶

As the Petraeus counterinsurgency manual makes clear, the only way to respond effectively to such a threat is with more troops. But while moving all the way to the manual's 20:1,000 ratio in Afghanistan is outside the U.S. and NATO's current capacity, we could do much better. Afghanistan has 4.5 million *more* residents than Iraq, yet the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan is about one-fifth of the number in Iraq.¹⁷ By almost doubling the number of American forces in Afghanistan to 50,000, we can retake the offensive against al Qaeda and finally destroy this grave threat.

That troops are needed more urgently in Afghanistan than Iraq is evident from our intelligence, which suggests the danger to America from al Qaeda in its safe haven along the Af-Pak border dwarfs the threat posed by the small and (according to the CIA Director) nearly defeated remnant of al Qaeda that remains in Iraq.¹⁸ Further, the latest news brings into stark relief the contrasting pleas of American commanders for more troops in Afghanistan with the willingness of the Iraqi government, in the context of Status of Forces negotiations, to toy with the idea of asking U.S. troops to leave.¹⁹

50 for Iraq: America can succeed in Iraq, but only if we are realistic about how our objective there relates to the threats we face elsewhere and the resources we have at our disposal. The original objective in Iraq, stripping Saddam Hussein of WMD, proved unnecessary. It is now clear that the President's objective of establishing a model democracy in Iraq was a fantasy. And yet that fantasy lies at the heart of the current objective in Iraq, meaning that despite some recent short security gains, our troops are sacrificing for an objective that is both unrealistic and less urgent to U.S. national security, rather than taking the fight to our mortal enemies in Afghanistan.

President Bush's decision to invade and occupy Iraq opened the door to al Qaeda and other foreign elements there. Our new objective in Iraq should be to close the door to terrorism. This is obviously imperative—we must not permit al Qaeda to make Iraq their new Afghanistan. Moreover, this is a realistic mission that can be achieved with a realistic number of troops. As experts have testified recently, a force of 50,000 troops would easily be sufficient to perform an anti-terrorist mission in Iraq aimed at denying al Qaeda a foothold in that country.²⁰ With this mission as our focus, we can dispense with policing Iraq's sectarian conflict and draw down to 50,000 U.S. troops.

50 for the Future: The United States military does not exist to salvage President Bush's legacy or to build a model society in Iraq; it exists to keep America safe. Our objective for our overextended military must be to restore its strength and readiness, returning the Army and Marine Corps to a sustainable operational tempo and maintaining a "ready brigade," available for immediate deployment to address unforeseen contingencies.

We can achieve this in the near term by cutting our war deployments down to 100,000 troops. But in the long run, the force needs to grow. While another ill-conceived war of choice is unlikely, we are almost certain to face dangerous power vacuums where a stabilization force is necessary. Such situations are not hard to conjure: extremists seizing the Nigerian oil fields; the Pakistani government dissolving into chaos and losing control of their nuclear weapons; the North Korean regime collapsing; internal unrest in Yemen threatening the region. No one can predict the when or where, but we can predict with confidence that, as this dangerous century continues, the U.S. will have need for strong and ready ground forces capable of performing and sustaining troop-intensive operations under difficult and unpredictable conditions.

To avoid dangerously straining the military in the future, we must grow the size of our ground forces to meet 21st century realities. As with so many other things, Donald Rumsfeld was wrong about this as well—the future of warfare for the United States is not likely to be about small and swift operations to topple governments, it will likely be about boots on the ground to prop them up. To get there, we should adopt a feasible, long-term plan to grow the Army and Marine Corps by 50,000 additional troops over the next five years.

Conclusion

We face a cunning and adaptive enemy. Al Qaeda and their allies understand that we have massed our forces in one theater and spread ourselves thin in another. They have adjusted their strategy and are now taking the fight to where they perceive us to be weak. The question is whether we will pursue and destroy them or will allow ourselves to be outflanked. The only way we can lose this fight—against a morally bankrupt and isolated enemy—is if we prove ourselves to be a slow and stubborn giant, unable to correct our course. If, by contrast, we are nimble enough to adapt and change, we can and will prevail.

Endnotes

¹ Vice President's Remarks at a Reception for the Republican Party of Virginia Commonwealth Gala, Richmond, VA. May 30, 2008
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/05/20080530-10.html>

² Hope Yen, "CIA Director calls Afghan-Pakistan border region 'clear and present danger,'" AP, Mar. 30, 2008.

³ Ann Scott Tyson and Robin Wright, "Mullen Urges Pakistan to Act on al Qaeda," *Washington Post*, June 11, 2008.

⁴ Ambassador David Crocker, Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 8, 2008.

⁵ FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5/1-13

⁶ In a country of 32.7 million people (CIA, 2008 World Factbook) to achieve a ratio of 20 counterinsurgents for every 1,000 residents would require a total counterinsurgent force of roughly 650,000. Together with 34,500 U.S. troops, there are presently about 29,500 non-US NATO and other international troops, 40,000 members of the Afghan National Army on duty, and 75,300 members of the Afghan National police assigned (CRS, Afghanistan: Post-War Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy, June 6, 2008), for a total counterinsurgent force of 179,300.

⁷ David Stout and Thom Shanker, "Next year's war costs estimated at \$170 billion or more," *NY Times*, Feb. 6, 2008.

⁸ "Joint Chiefs Chairman Mullen says Basra fight does not indicate need for more U.S. troops in Iraq," AP, April, 3, 2008.

⁹ Yochi Dreazen, "U.S. Struggles to Bolster Afghan Forces," *Wall Street Journal*, May 6, 2008.

¹⁰ Defense Department Media Roundtable with Secretary Gates and General Pace, March 7, 2007
<http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=3900>; "Defense Infrastructure: Army and Marine Corps Grow the Force Construction Projects Generally Support the Initiative," GAO, March 6, 2008.

¹¹ See Third Way, *The Blunted Spear III: The Iraq War and US War-Fighting Ability*, <http://thirdway.org/products/125> and *The Blunted Spear II: The Army at the Breaking Point*, <http://thirdway.org/products/117>.

¹² Megan Scully, "Senate Armed Services chairman: Army funding requests might fall short," *Congress Daily*, February 26, 2008.

¹³ Bryce S. Dube, "Gen. Casey Addresses State of the Army", *The Pacific Stars and Stripes*, Dec. 18, 2007

¹⁴ Philip Carter and Paul Glastris, "The Case for a Draft," *Washington Monthly*, March 2005 put the number troops that can be deployed to the two wars on a sustainable basis at 80,000. BG Kevin Ryan (USA ret), Senior Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, estimates that the Army and Marine Corps can sustainably deploy 10 brigades plus support units (roughly 100,000 troops) in Iraq and 2 brigades and support (about 20,000) in Afghanistan, for a sustainable deployment force of roughly 120,000. (Email from Ryan to Scott Payne, June 19, 2008) We have settled on 100,000 troops as an estimate that is comfortably within this range, allowing for a 3:1 dwell-to-deployment ratio and the maintenance of a ready brigade in reserve.

¹⁵ Aunohita Mojumdar, "Afghan Prison Attack Stirs Tensions with Pakistan," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 16, 2008.

¹⁶ Peter Bergen, on *CNN Late Edition*, June 22, 2008 ("And in fact, there is some evidence, now, that people within Al Qaida are leaving Iraq for Afghanistan, which they see as a, sort of, more fruitful area of jihad than Iraq itself."); Ahmed Rashid, on the same show ("I think the Taliban advances could not have taken place without support from Al Qaida. It is Al Qaida that has established for the Taliban the route to Iraq, and so there's a lot of traffic, now, between Al Qaida in Iraq and Al Qaida in Pakistan, Afghanistan.

Al Qaida has also increased the money from the drugs trade for them. Because Al Qaida is now being able to deal with traffickers well outside Afghanistan, and rake in much larger profits from drugs trafficking than before. And Al Qaida, of course, seems to be very much an organizational tool for the Taliban. For example, I'm sure that this jail break, with all its sophistication, was probably carried out with the help of some planning by Al Qaida operatives.”).

¹⁷ Iraq has a population of 28.2 million (CIA, 2008 World Factbook), and Afghanistan has a population of 32.7 million. In April 2008, there were roughly 146,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and 34,000 in Afghanistan.

¹⁸ Joby Warrick, “U.S. cites big gains against al-Qaeda,” *Washington Post*, May 30, 2008.

¹⁹ Amit R. Paley and Karen DeYoung, “Iraqis Condemn American Demands,” *Washington Post*, June 11, 2008.

²⁰ Andrew Krepinovich, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Jan. 23, 2008.

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