

**U.S. Senator Richard G. Lugar**  
**Speech Delivered on the Senate Floor**  
**The Need for a Course Change in Iraq**  
**June 25, 2007**

Madam President, I rise today to offer observations on the continuing involvement of the United States in Iraq. In my judgment, our course in Iraq has lost contact with our vital national security interests in the Middle East and beyond. Our continuing absorption with military activities in Iraq is limiting our diplomatic assertiveness there and elsewhere in the world. The prospects that the current “surge” strategy will succeed in the way originally envisioned by the President are very limited within the short period framed by our own domestic political debate. And the strident, polarized nature of that debate increases the risk that our involvement in Iraq will end in a poorly planned withdrawal that undercuts our vital interests in the Middle East. Unless we recalibrate our strategy in Iraq to fit our domestic political conditions and the broader needs of U.S. national security, we risk foreign policy failures that could greatly diminish our influence in the region and the world.

The current debate on Iraq in Washington has not been conducive to a thoughtful revision of our Iraq policy. Our debate is being driven by partisan political calculations and understandable fatigue with bad news -- including deaths and injuries to Americans. We have been debating and voting on whether to fund American troops in Iraq and whether to place conditions on such funding. We have contemplated in great detail whether Iraqi success in achieving certain benchmarks should determine whether funding is approved or whether a withdrawal should commence. I would observe that none of this debate addresses our vital interests any more than they are addressed by an unquestioned devotion to an ill-defined strategy of “staying the course” in Iraq.

I speak to my fellow Senators, when I say that the President is not the only American leader who will have to make adjustments to his or her thinking. Each of us should take a step back from the sloganeering rhetoric and political opportunism that has sometimes characterized this debate. The task of securing U.S. interests in the Middle East will be extremely difficult if Iraq policy is formulated on a partisan basis, with the protagonists on both sides ignoring the complexities at the core of our situation.

Commentators frequently suggest that the United States has no good options in Iraq. That may be true from a certain perspective. But I believe that we do have viable options that could strengthen our position in the Middle East, and reduce the prospect of terrorism, regional war, and other calamities. But seizing these opportunities will require the President to downsize the U.S. military’s role in Iraq and place much more emphasis on diplomatic and economic options. It will also require members of Congress to be receptive to overtures by the President to construct a new policy outside the binary choice of surge versus withdrawal. We don’t owe the President our unquestioning agreement, but we do owe him and the American people our constructive engagement.

Seeking a Sustainable Policy

In my judgment, the costs and risks of continuing down the current path outweigh the potential benefits that might be achieved. Persisting indefinitely with the surge strategy will delay policy adjustments that have a better chance of protecting our vital interests over the long term.

I do not come to this conclusion lightly, particularly given that General Petraeus will deliver a formal report in September on his efforts to improve security. The interim information we have received from General Petraeus and other officials has been helpful and appreciated. I do not doubt the

assessments of military commanders that there has been some progress in security. More security improvements in the coming months may be achieved. We should attempt to preserve initiatives that have shown promise, such as engaging Sunni groups that are disaffected with the extreme tactics and agenda of Al Qaeda in Iraq. But three factors – the political fragmentation in Iraq, the growing stress on our military, and the constraints of our own domestic political process -- are converging to make it almost impossible for the United States to engineer a stable, multi-sectarian government in Iraq in a reasonable time frame.

### Iraqis Don't Want to Be Iraqis

First, it is very doubtful that the leaders of Iraqi factions are capable of implementing a political settlement in the short run. I see no convincing evidence that Iraqis will make the compromises necessary to solidify a functioning government and society, even if we reduce violence to a point that allows for some political and economic normalcy.

In recent months, we have seen votes in the Iraqi parliament calling for a withdrawal of American forces and condemning security walls in Baghdad that were a reasonable response to neighborhood violence. The Iraqi parliament struggles even to achieve a quorum, because many prominent leaders decline to attend. We have seen overt feuds between members of the Iraqi government, including Prime Minister Maliki and Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, who did not speak to each other for the entire month of April. The Shia-led government is going out of its way to bottle up money budgeted for Sunni provinces. Without strident intervention by our embassy, food rations are not being delivered to Sunni towns. Iraqi leaders have resisted de-Baathification reform, the conclusion of an oil law, and effective measures to prevent oil smuggling and other corrupt practices.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari has told me that various aspects of an oil law and revenue distribution could be passed by September. But he emphasized that Iraqis are attempting to make policy in a difficult environment by broad consensus -- not by majority vote. He believes other policy advancements will take considerable time, but that consensus is the safest and most appropriate approach in a fledgling democracy.

This may be true, but Americans want results in months. Meanwhile, various Iraqi factions are willing to wait years to achieve vital objectives. Even if the results of military operations improve in the coming months, there is little reason to assume that this will diminish Sunni ambitions to reclaim political preeminence or Shia plans to dominate Iraq after decades of Saddam's harsh rule. Few Iraqi leaders are willing to make sacrifices or expose themselves to risks on behalf of the type of unified Iraq that the Bush Administration had envisioned. In contrast, there are many Iraqi leaders who are deeply invested in a sectarian or tribal agenda. More often than not, these agendas involve not just the protection of fellow Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, but the expansion of territorial dominance and economic privileges.

Even if U.S. negotiators found a way to forge a political settlement among selected representatives of the major sectarian factions, these leaders have not shown the ability to control their members at the local level. After an intense year-and-a-half of bloodletting, many sub-factions are thoroughly invested in the violence. We have the worst of both worlds in Iraq – factional leaders who don't believe in our pluralist vision for their country and smaller sub-factions who are pursuing violence on their own regardless of any accommodations by more moderate fellow sectarians. As David Brooks recently observed in the New York Times, the fragmentation in Iraq has become so prevalent that Iraq may not even be able to carry out a traditional civil war among cohesive factions.

Few Iraqis have demonstrated that they want to be Iraqis. We may bemoan this, but it is not a surprising phenomenon. The behavior of most Iraqis is governed by calculations related to their history, their personal safety, their basic economic existence, and their tribal or sectarian loyalties. These are primal forces that have constrained the vision of most ordinary Iraqis to the limits of their neighborhoods and villages.

In this context, the possibility that the United States can set meaningful benchmarks that would provide an indication of impending success or failure is remote. Perhaps some benchmarks or agreements will be initially achieved, but most can be undermined or reversed by a contrary edict of the Iraqi government, a decision by a faction to ignore agreements, or the next terrorist attack or wave of sectarian killings. American manpower cannot keep the lid on indefinitely. The anticipation that our training operations could produce an effective Iraqi army loyal to a cohesive central government is still just a hopeful plan for the future.

I suspect that for some Americans, benchmarks are a means of justifying a withdrawal by demonstrating that Iraq is irredeemable. For others, benchmarks represent an attempt to validate our military presence by showing progress against a low fixed standard. But in neither case are benchmark tests addressing our broader national security interests.

Equally unproven is the theory voiced by some supporters of a withdrawal that removing American troops from Iraq would stimulate a grand compromise between Iraqi factions. Some Iraqi leaders may react this way. But most assume that we will soon begin to withdraw troops, and they are preparing to carry on or accelerate the fight in the absence of American forces. Iraqi militias have shown an ability to adapt to conditions on the ground, expanding or contracting their operations as security imperatives warrant.

American strategy must adjust to the reality that sectarian factionalism will not abate anytime soon and probably cannot be controlled from the top.

### Stress on the Military Instrument

The second factor working against our ability to engineer a stable government in Iraq is the fatigue of our military. The window during which we can continue to employ American troops in Iraqi neighborhoods without damaging our military strength or our ability to respond to other national security priorities is closing. Some observers may argue that we cannot put a price on securing Iraq and that our military readiness is not threatened. But this is a naive assessment of our national security resources.

American armed forces are incredibly resilient, but Iraq is taking a toll on recruitment and readiness. In April, the Defense Department announced it would lengthen tours of duty for soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan from 12 to 15 months. Many soldiers are now on their way to a third combat tour.

Last month, for the 27th consecutive year, in a ceremony witnessed by tens of thousands of Hoosiers, I swore in new military recruits on Pit Road at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Over the course of the weekend, I visited with the recruits, with the recruiters, and with military officials. I heard personal stories of the 70-hour work weeks put in by recruiters to meet recruiting goals. I was impressed with each of the 66 young men and women I swore in. They are joining a military at war, and each of them is showing tremendous courage and commitment to our country.

The swearing-in ceremony was preceded by a briefing from Army officials here in Washington who assured me that we are fielding the best equipped, best trained, and most capable force we have ever had. Yet, they also reported that the Army has exhausted its bench. Instead of resting and training for 3 to 12 months, brigades coming out of the field must now be ready almost immediately for redeployment.

Basic recruiting targets are being met, but statistics point to significant declines in the percentage of recruits who have high school diplomas and who score above average on the Army's aptitude test. Meanwhile, the Army has dramatically increased the use of waivers for recruits who have committed felonies, and it has relaxed weight and age standards.

The Army is asking for \$2 billion more this year for recruitment incentives, advertising, and related activities. It needs \$13 to \$14 billion a year to reset the force to acceptable readiness ratings, and they will need that amount for up to three years after the end of the current operations. The Army needs \$52 billion more this year to fill equipment shortages and modernize. These figures do not include the billions of dollars required to implement the planned 65,000 soldier increase in the size of the active force.

Filling expanding ranks will be increasingly difficult given trends in attitudes toward military service. This has been measured by the Joint Advertising Market Research and Studies Program, which produced a "Propensity Update" last September after extensive research. The study found that only 1 in 10 youths has a propensity to serve – the lowest percentage in the history of such surveys. 61 percent of youth respondents report that they will "definitely not serve." This represents a 7 percent increase in less than a year. These numbers are directly attributable to policies in Iraq. When combined with the Army's estimate that only 3 of 10 youths today meet basic physical, behavioral, and academic requirements for military service, the consequences of continuing to stretch the military are dire.

The U.S. military remains the strongest fighting force in the world, but we have to be mindful that it is not indestructible. Before the next conflict, we have much to do to repair this invaluable instrument. This repair cannot begin until we move to a more sustainable Iraq policy.

### Constraints of our Domestic Political Timetable

The third factor inhibiting our ability to establish a stable, multi-sectarian government in Iraq is the timetable imposed by our own domestic political process. The President and some of his advisors may be tempted to pursue the surge strategy to the end of his administration, but such a course contains extreme risks for U.S. national security. It would require the President to fight a political rear-guard holding action for more than a year and a half against Congressional attempts to limit, modify, or end military operations in Iraq. The resulting contentiousness would make cooperation on national security issues nearly impossible. It would greatly increase the chances for a poorly planned withdrawal from Iraq or possibly the broader Middle East region that could damage U.S. interests for decades.

The President and his team must come to grips with the shortened political timeline in this country for military operations in Iraq. Some will argue that political timelines should always be subordinated to military necessity, but that is unrealistic in a democracy. Many political observers contend that voter dissatisfaction in 2006 with Administration policies in Iraq was the major factor in producing new Democratic Party majorities in both Houses of Congress. Domestic politics routinely

intrude on diplomatic and military decisions. The key is to manage these intrusions so that we avoid actions that are not in our national interest.

We do not know whether the next President will be a Democrat or a Republican. But it is certain that domestic pressure for withdrawal will continue to be intense. A course change should happen now, while there is still some possibility of constructing a sustainable bipartisan strategy in Iraq. If the President waits until the presidential election campaign is in full swing, the intensity of confrontation on Iraq is likely to limit U.S. options.

I am not implying that debate on Iraq is bad. I am suggesting what most Senate observers understand intuitively: little nuance or bipartisanship will be possible if the Iraq debate plays out during a contentious national election that will determine control of the White House and Congress.

In short, our political timeline will not support a rational course adjustment in Iraq, unless such an adjustment is initiated very soon.

### Focusing on Vital Interests

Madam President, in January, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee heard from former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who recalled a half century of U.S. involvement in the Middle East. He argued that this history was not accidental. We have been heavily involved in the region because we have enduring vital interests at stake. We may make tactical decisions about the deployment or withdrawal of forces in Iraq, but we must plan for a strong strategic position in the region for years to come.

This is not just a maxim from diplomatic textbooks. The vitality of the U.S. economy and the economies of much of the world depend on the oil that comes from the Persian Gulf. The safety of the United States depends on how we react to nuclear proliferation in the region and how we combat terrorist cells and ideologies that reside there.

The risk for decision-makers is that after a long struggle in Iraq, accompanied by a contentious political process at home, we begin to see Iraq as a set piece -- as an end in itself, distinct from the broader interests that we meant to protect. We risk becoming fixated on artificial notions of achieving victory or avoiding defeat, when these ill-defined concepts have little relevance to our operations in Iraq. What is important is not the precise configuration of the Iraqi government or the achievement of specific benchmarks, but rather how Iraq impacts our geostrategic situation in the Middle East and beyond. The President's troop surge is an early episode in a much broader Middle East realignment that began with our invasion of Iraq and may not end for years. Nations throughout the Middle East are scrambling to find their footing as regional power balances shift in unpredictable ways.

Although the Bush Administration has scaled back its definition of success in Iraq, we are continuing to pour our treasure and manpower into the narrow and uncertain pursuit of creating a stable, democratic, pluralist society in Iraq. This pursuit has been the focal point of the Bush Administration's Middle East policy. Unfortunately, this objective is not one on which our future in the region can rest, especially when far more important goals related to Middle East security are languishing. I am not suggesting that what happens in Iraq is not important, but the Bush Administration must avoid becoming so quixotic in its attempt to achieve its optimum forecasts for Iraq that it misses other opportunities to protect our vital interests in the Middle East.

To determine our future course, we should separate our emotions and frustrations about Iraq from a sober assessment of our fundamental national security goals. In my judgment, we should be concerned with four primary objectives:

First, we have an interest in preventing Iraq or any piece of its territory from being used as a safe haven or training ground for terrorists or as a repository or assembly point for weapons of mass destruction.

Second, we have an interest in preventing the disorder and sectarian violence in Iraq from upsetting wider regional stability. The consequences of turmoil that draws neighboring states into a regional war could be grave. Such turmoil could topple friendly governments, expand destabilizing refugee flows, close the Persian Gulf to shipping traffic, or destroy key oil production or transportation facilities, thus diminishing the flow of oil from the region with disastrous results for the world economy.

Third, we have an interest in preventing Iranian domination of the region. The fall of Saddam Hussein's Sunni government opened up opportunities for Iran to seek much greater influence in Iraq and in the broader Middle East. An aggressive Iran would pose serious challenges for Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and other Arab governments. Iran is pressing a broad agenda in the Middle East with uncertain consequences for weapons proliferation, terrorism, the security of Israel, and other U.S. interests. Any course we adopt should consider how it would impact the regional influence of Iran.

Fourth, we have an interest in limiting the loss of U.S. credibility in the region and throughout the world as a result of our Iraq mission. Some loss of confidence in the United States has already occurred, but our subsequent actions in Iraq may determine how we are viewed for a generation.

In my judgment, the current surge strategy is not an effective means of protecting these interests. Its prospects for success are too dependent on the actions of others who do not share our agenda. It relies on military power to achieve goals that it cannot achieve. It distances allies that we will need for any regional diplomatic effort. Its failure, without a careful transition to a back-up policy would intensify our loss of credibility. It uses tremendous amounts of resources that cannot be employed in other ways to secure our objectives. And it lacks domestic support that is necessary to sustain a policy of this type.

A total withdrawal from Iraq also fails to meet our security interests. Such a withdrawal would compound the risks of a wider regional conflict stimulated by Sunni-Shia tensions. It would also be a severe blow to U.S. credibility that would make nations in the region far less likely to cooperate with us on shared interests. It would increase the potential for armed conflict between Turkey and Kurdish forces in Iraq. It would expose Iraqis who have worked with us to retribution, increase the chances of destabilizing refugee flows, and undercut many economic and development projects currently underway in Iraq. It would also be a signal that the United States was abandoning efforts to prevent Iraqi territory from being used as a terrorist base.

Moreover, advocates of an immediate withdrawal have tended to underestimate the requirements and complexities of such an operation. General Barry McCaffrey testified at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on January 18, 2007, that an immediate withdrawal aimed at getting out of Iraq as fast as possible would take six months. A carefully planned withdrawal that sought to preserve as much American equipment as possible, protect Iraqis who have worked with us,

continue anti-terrorist operations during the withdrawal period, and minimize negative regional consequences would take months longer.

### Shifting to a Sustainable Military Posture

Our security interests call for a downsizing and re-deployment of U.S. military forces to more sustainable positions in Iraq or the Middle East. Numerous locations for temporary or permanent military bases have been suggested, including Kuwait or other nearby states, the Kurdish territories, or defensible locations in Iraq outside of urban areas. All of these options come with problems and limitations. But some level of American military presence in Iraq would improve the odds that we could respond to terrorist threats, protect oil flows, and help deter a regional war. It would also reassure friendly governments that the United States is committed to Middle East security. A re-deployment would allow us to continue training Iraqi troops and delivering economic assistance, but it would end the U.S. attempt to interpose ourselves between Iraqi sectarian factions.

Six months ago, the Iraq Study Group endorsed a gradual downsizing of American forces in Iraq and the evolution of their mission to a support role for the Iraqi army. I do not necessarily agree with every recommendation of the Iraq Study Group, and its analysis requires some updating given the passage of time. But the report provides a useful starting point for the development of a “Plan B” and a template for bipartisan cooperation on our Iraq strategy.

We should understand that if the re-deployment of a downsized force is to be safe and effective, our military planners and diplomats must have as much time as possible to develop and implement the details. We will need the cooperation of the Iraqi government and key states in the region, which will not come automatically. The logistics of a shift in policy toward a residual force will test military planners, who have been consumed with the surge. In 2003, we witnessed the costs that came with insufficient planning for the aftermath of the Iraq invasion. It is absolutely essential that we not repeat the same mistake. The longer we delay the planning for a re-deployment, the less likely it is to be successful.

### Going on the Offensive

The United States has violated some basic national security precepts during our military engagement in Iraq. We have overestimated what the military can achieve, we have set goals that are unrealistic, and we have inadequately factored in the broader regional consequences of our actions. Perhaps most critically, our focus on Iraq has diverted us from opportunities to change the world in directions that strengthen our national security.

Our struggles in Iraq have placed U.S. foreign policy on a defensive footing and drawn resources from other national security endeavors, including Afghanistan. With few exceptions, our diplomatic initiatives are encumbered by negative global and regional attitudes toward our combat presence in Iraq.

In this era, the United States cannot afford to be on a defensive footing indefinitely. It is essential that as we attempt to re-position ourselves from our current military posture in Iraq, we launch a multi-faceted diplomatic offensive that pushes adversarial states and terrorist groups to adjust to us. The best counter to perceptions that we have lost credibility in Iraq would be a sustained and ambitious set of initiatives that repairs alliances and demonstrates our staying power in the Middle East.

The Iraq Study Group report recommended such a diplomatic offensive, stating “all key issues in the Middle East – the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, Iran, the need for political and economic reforms, and extremism and terrorism, are inextricably linked.” The report stressed that diplomacy aimed at solving key regional issues would “help marginalize extremists and terrorists, promote U.S. values and interests, and improve America’s global image.”

A diplomatic offensive is likely to be easier in the context of a tactical drawdown of U.S. troops in Iraq. A drawdown would increase the chances of stimulating greater economic and diplomatic assistance for Iraq from multi-lateral organizations and European allies, who have sought to limit their association with an unpopular war.

A first step is working with like-minded nations to establish a consistent diplomatic forum related to Iraq that is open to all parties in the Middle East. The purpose of the forum would be to improve transparency of national interests so that neighboring states and other actors avoid miscalculations. I believe it would be in the self-interest of every nation in the region to attend such meetings, as well as the United States, EU representatives, or other interested parties. Such a forum could facilitate more regular contact with Syria and Iran with less drama and rhetoric that has accompanied some meetings. The existence of a predictable and regular forum in the region would be especially important for dealing with refugee problems, regulating borders, exploring development initiatives, and preventing conflict between the Kurds and Turks. Just as the Six-Party talks have improved communications in Northeast Asia beyond the issue of North Korea’s nuclear program, stabilizing Iraq could be the occasion for a diplomatic forum that contributes to other Middle East priorities.

Eventually, part of the massive U.S. embassy under construction in Baghdad might be a suitable location for the forum. It is likely that the embassy compound will exceed the evolving needs of the United States. If this is true, we should carefully consider how best to use this asset, which might be suitable for diplomatic, educational, or governmental activities in Iraq.

We should be mindful that the United States does not lack diplomatic assets. Most regional governments are extremely wary of U.S. abandonment of the Middle East. Moderate states are concerned by Iran’s aggressiveness and by the possibility of sectarian conflict beyond Iraq’s borders. They recognize that the United States is an indispensable counterweight to Iran and a source of stability. The United States should continue to organize regional players – Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, the Gulf States, and others – behind a program of containing Iran’s disruptive agenda in the region.

Such a re-alignment has relevance for stabilizing Iraq and bringing security to other areas of conflict, including Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. The United States should make clear to our Arab friends that they have a role in promoting reconciliation within Iraq, preventing oil price spikes, splitting Syria from Iran, and demonstrating a more united front against terrorism.

### The Elephants in the Room

A diplomatic offensive centered on Iraq and surrounding countries would help lift American interests in the Middle East. But credibility and sustainability of our actions depend on addressing the two elephants in the room of U.S. Middle East policy -- the Arab-Israeli conflict and U.S. dependence on Persian Gulf oil. These are the two problems that our adversaries, especially Iran, least want us to

address. They are the conditions that most constrain our freedom of action and perpetuate vulnerabilities. The implementation of an effective program to remedy these conditions could be as valuable to our long-term security as the achievement of a stable, pro-Western government in Iraq.

The Arab-Israeli conflict will not be easily solved. Recent combat between the Hamas and Fatah Palestinian factions that led to Hamas' military preeminence in the Gaza Strip complicates efforts to put the peace process back on track. But even if a settlement is not an immediate possibility, we have to demonstrate clearly that the United States is committed to helping facilitate a negotiated outcome. Progress in the Arab-Israeli conflict would not end the sectarian conflict in Iraq, but it could restore credibility lost by the United States in the region. It also would undercut terrorist propaganda, slow Iranian influence, and open new possibilities related to Syria.

Clearly, the United States does not have the influence to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict unilaterally. In contrast, our dependence on Persian Gulf oil is largely within our capacity to fix. Do not underestimate the impact on Iran and other nations of a concerted U.S. campaign to reduce our oil consumption. A credible, well-publicized campaign to definitively change the oil import equation would reverberate throughout the Middle East. It would be the equivalent of opening a new front in Middle Eastern policy that does not depend on the good will of any other country.

Many options exist for rapid progress in reducing our Persian Gulf oil dependence, but I would emphasize two. First, President Bush or his successor could establish the national goal of making competitively-priced biofuels available to every motorist in America. Such an accomplishment would transform our transportation sector and cut our oil import bill. It would require multiple elements, including ensuring that virtually every new car sold in America is a flexible fuel vehicle capable of running on an 85 percent ethanol fuel known as E-85; that at least a quarter of American filling stations have E-85 pumps; and that ethanol production from various sources is expanded to as much as 100 billion gallons a year within the next 15 to 20 years. Such a campaign could achieve the replacement of 6.5 million barrels of oil per day by volume -- the rough equivalent of one third of the oil used in America and one half of our current oil imports. None of these goals are easy, but they are achievable if Presidential advocacy and the weight of the Federal Government are devoted to their realization. Brazil already has achieved the large scale deployment of ethanol as a national transportation fuel, and its success is a source of public pride in that country.

Second, the President could commit to a radical increase in the miles per gallon of America's auto fleet. The Federal government has numerous tools to make this happen, from direct federal support for research, to government fleet purchasing, to market regulations and incentives.

Incredibly, cars in America today get less mileage per gallon than they did twenty years ago. Meanwhile, hybrids, plug-in hybrids, and fully electric cars are at or nearly at commercialization, yet there is not enough incentive for consumers to buy them or producers to make them on the mass scale necessary. For fiscal year 2008, the Administration requested just \$176 million for new vehicle technology research -- an amount that was less than what was requested five years ago.

Given that other developed nations have made great strides in improving fuel economy, this is fertile ground for rapid improvement. In fact, achievements on this front largely would be a matter of generating and sustaining political will that has, thus far, been disappointing.

## Conclusion

Madam President, the issue before us is whether we will refocus our policy in Iraq on realistic assessments of what can be achieved, and on a sober review of our vital interests in the Middle East. Given the requirements of military planners, the stress of our combat forces, and our own domestic political timeline, we are running out of time to implement a thoughtful Plan B that attempts to protect our substantial interests in the region, while downsizing our military presence in Iraq.

We need to recast the geo-strategic reference points of our Iraq policy. We need to be preparing for how we will array U.S. forces in the region to target terrorist enclaves, deter adventurism by Iran, provide a buffer against regional sectarian conflict, and generally reassure friendly governments that the United States is committed to Middle East security. Simultaneously, we must be aggressive and creative in pursuing a regional dialogue that is not limited to our friends. We cannot allow fatigue and frustration with our Iraq policy to lead to the abandonment of the tools and relationships we need to defend our vital interests in the Middle East.

If we are to seize opportunities to preserve these interests, the Administration and Congress must suspend what has become almost knee-jerk political combat over Iraq. Those who offer constructive criticism of the surge strategy are not defeatists, any more than those who warn against a precipitous withdrawal are militarists. We need to move Iraq policy beyond the politics of the moment and re-establish a broad consensus on the role of the United States in the Middle East. If we do that, the United States has the diplomatic influence and economic and military power to strengthen mutually beneficial policies that could enhance security and prosperity throughout the region. I pray that the President and the Congress will move swiftly and surely to achieve that goal.