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United States Senate

December 12, 2006

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President George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
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Dear Mr. President:

After three and one half years of war in Iraq, I remain committed, as I know you do, to the proposition that America must be successful in its mission there. The consequences of failure – both strategic and moral – are too profound for us to make anything but our mightiest efforts to prevail.

For this reason, I have followed with great interest the various policy reviews that have been conducted in recent weeks, including the Iraq Study Group final report and the review that your administration is conducting internally. While there is no doubt that a number of changes are necessary, I believe none will be successful without an increase in the number of U.S. forces in theatre.

Only the presence of additional coalition forces will give the Iraqi government the opportunity to impose its authority. There has been much discussion about the nature of the problem in Iraq, and agreement that it is largely a political matter. The conflict there does stem in part from profound political disagreements, and amelioration of those differences can lead to a decline in violence. But the political factions there, together with the various militias and other extra-governmental forces, are unlikely to begin reconciliation without some basic level of security in which to do so. Until the government and its coalition allies can provide safety for the population, the Iraqi people will increasingly turn to extra-governmental forces, especially Sunni and Shia militias, to do it for them.

Despite our hopes, the democratic political process failed thus far to reduce the insurgency. It may have even sharpened Iraq's sectarian tendencies, and further political competition in the absence of meaningful security is likely to do the same. "Holding the line" militarily while we wait for the political process to somehow reduce violence has not worked and will not work -- because security is the precondition for political progress and economic development in Iraq. Without a basic level of security, there will be no political solution and our mission will fail.

We must, I believe, establish as the U.S. military's priority the goal of establishing security in Iraq, imposing the Iraqi government's authority, and maintaining both. Training Iraqi forces so that they may take on these roles without us is important, but of secondary importance.

Some critics of increasing military resources for Iraq, including top military commanders, have argued that the United States "cannot" do so, even if it wished, because we simply lack the resources. In arguing this, these individuals implicitly state that they place greater priority on goals other than winning the war. The argument that it is impossible to increase troop levels implies that it is more important to avoid straining the Army and Marine Corps than to avoid defeat in Iraq, or that extended rotations and repeated tours of duty are an unacceptable price to pay for an enhanced chance of success there.

The question is one of will more than capacity. As the world's richest country, with 1.4 million troops under arms, and having contained sectarian conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s, we have the capacity to properly resource this war. It is my strong belief that we need to begin doing so immediately. If we are not willing to provide the troops necessary for victory, however, victory itself will be impossible.

In fact, the United States is capable of increasing the number of troops fighting in Iraq. A study completed at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), for example, notes that the Department of Defense recently announced that it will deploy over 50,000 troops to Iraq this spring, including more than 20,000 combat troops. If the forces already on the ground are kept in place, rather than rotated home, this study shows that there would be an immediate surge of 20,000 combat troops.

The AEI study indicates that, by extending Army rotations to 15 months and some Marine Corps rotations to 12 months, we could generate four to five additional U.S. brigades available for traditional counterinsurgency operations in Baghdad, two additional U.S. brigades available to operate north and south of Baghdad, two additional regimental combat teams available in al-Anbar Province, and possibly an additional U.S. brigade available for al-Anbar. The U.S. troop presence could rise from approximately 140,000 now, to 164,500 in March, to 171,500 in September.

This is one study; I am certain that others would draw similar conclusions. If we are willing to make some painful choices, we can increase the number of U.S. troops available for service in Iraq. Not only is such a troop increase unlikely to "break" our Army and Marine Corps, the strains it will undoubtedly induce pale in comparison to the effect that defeat in Iraq would have on our armed forces.

By surging five additional brigades into Baghdad by March, tasking them with traditional counterinsurgency activity (including protection of the population and intensive reconstruction), we would give the coalition, in concert with Iraqi security forces, a real chance to succeed in its mission. Such a surge should not be limited by an

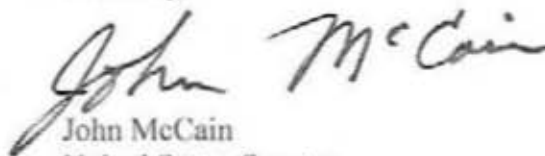
artificial timetable -- a time limited deployment would have, on a smaller scale, the same negative effects of a national timetable for withdrawal.

Only when the government has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force will its authority have meaning; only when its authority has meaning can political activity have the results we all seek for Iraq. In bringing security to the capital, our forces would augment the authority and will of the Iraqi government and give it a fighting chance to pursue reconciliation. I believe such a "surge, clear and hold" strategy offers the best way forward in Iraq.

Even if the United States provides additional troops as advocated in this letter, there is obviously no guarantee of success. I believe success in Iraq is still possible, and that, by finally bringing security to Baghdad, and by reducing the violence plaguing other areas, we can give Iraqis the best possible opportunity to construct a stable and self-governing state. Our national security compels us to try, and to try immediately.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter and for your leadership on this issue.

Sincerely,



John McCain
United States Senator