Center for American Progress

To:	**Members of the 110th Congress**
From:	**John Podesta, Lawrence Korb, and Brian Katulis**
Re:	**Iraq Study Group's Recommendations Overtaken by Events in Iraq**
Date:	**July 11, 2007**

Senators Ken Salazar (D-CO) and Lamar Alexander (R-TN) have introduced legislation that would adopt all of the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group. There are growing signs that the White House and Republican legislators, having previously rejected the ISG report late last year, will now seek to co-opt the ISG recommendations this summer and fall to provide a bipartisan veneer to their efforts to pretend they are shifting course in Iraq.

We acknowledge the important contributions made by the ISG and its co-chairmen James Baker and Lee Hamilton, but progressives need to point out that some of the ISG's recommendations are ambiguous and others have been overtaken by events. Congress needs to understand that the ISG's three main recommendations face five key issues that raise questions about the relevance of the ISG's recommendations today.

The ISG report had three main recommendations:

1. Place greater emphasis on political benchmarks for the Iraqi government to ensure disaffected groups (specifically the Sunnis) are brought into Iraq's political process

2. Accelerate and increase the training of Iraqi security forces to allow them to take over from U.S. forces and transition U.S. forces from combat missions in 2008

3. Initiate a region-wide diplomatic offensive to contain and resolve Iraq's conflicts.

The ISG recommendations now face five practical obstacles:

1. Conditioning U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq on the outdated "We'll stand down when the Iraqis stand up" formula.

The main problem with the ISG report is that it conditions the eventual U.S. troop withdrawal on Iraq's splintered national leadership. The ISG report spells out a long list of preconditions for withdrawing U.S. troops, which actually gets the situation backwards—the United States needs to put Iraqis and the countries in the region on notice to motivate them to act more constructively in their own self-interest in order to contain and resolve Iraq's multiple internal conflicts.

The fundamental challenge with Iraq's security forces is not skills building and training. It is instead a problem of motivation and allegiance. The last six months in Iraq have reinforced the point that Iraqis will not take responsibility as long as U.S. forces remain in the country in such large numbers. Despite the latest escalation, the Iraqi government has not made any progress toward reconciliation.

The Bush strategy as well as the core ISG recommendations ignore a fundamental reality—that the situation in Iraq has little chance to improve until U.S. troops begin redeploying.

2. Placing too much focus on Iraq's central government, a dysfunctional and divided government that lacks the unified support of its own leaders.

The ISG recommendations place a strong emphasis on getting the Iraqi national government to meet several political benchmarks that are not only unachievable in the short term but irrelevant today because of changed conditions in Iraq. In fact, the Iraqi national government is increasingly trapped in bitter disputes along sectarian lines that have paralyzed the government.

Iraq's leaders fundamentally disagree on what Iraq is and should be. The benchmarks passed by Congress in May—the subject of a forthcoming report from the Bush administration—ignore the key reality that Iraq may suffer from unbridgeable divides.

Meeting these political benchmarks will likely have no effect on the major conflicts in Iraq and may well exacerbate the Kurd-Arab and intra-Shi'a conflicts emerging in Iraq's northern and southern regions. As such, these benchmarks provide false hope for resolving a series of conflicts that require a much deeper solution than the United States can provide unilaterally.

3. Paying insufficient attention to the 2005 Iraq Constitution and the will of the Iraqi people.

The ISG report outlines a course that would lead to the unraveling of Iraq's constitution. One of the ISG's main recommendations is that "the [United States] should support as much as possible central control by governmental authorities in Baghdad, particularly on the question of oil revenue." But this cuts against the grain of what Iraqis supported in their own constitution, passed by popular referendum in 2005. Iraq's constitution establishes a framework for a strongly decentralized federal system.

Not surprisingly, many Iraqi leaders objected to the recommendations of the ISG report. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, rejected the ISG report. In addition to criticisms from Iraq's leaders, the ISG recommendations lack a broad-base of support among Iraqis, a strong majority of whom want U.S. forces to leave Iraq within a year.

According to a poll of the Iraqi public conducted in 2006, 71 percent of Iraqis wanted the Iraqi government to ask for U.S.-led forces to be withdrawn from Iraq within a year or

less. Another 61 percent support attacks on U.S.-led forces. In short, many Iraqis are opposed to the ISG recommendations, and as a result the United States would face severe problems attempting to implement them.

4. Supporting the unconditional training of Iraq's security forces, which is deeply problematic.

The core of the ISG report is the recommendation that the United States accelerate and increase the training of Iraqi security forces. It proposes an American advisory effort of between 10,000 and 20,000, comparable to the U.S. advisory strength in Vietnam at its height. Increasing the capacity of the Iraqi security forces, however, won't rectify their three main problems:

> ➢ **The Iraqi security forces are far from reliable.** The Pentagon estimates that at least one-third of the Iraqi Army is on leave at any one time; desertion and other problems bring the total to over half in some units. Of the 11,000 Iraqi soldiers assigned to the recent U.S.-led offensive in Baquba in June, only 1,500 showed up.[1] Infiltration by sectarian militias into the Interior Ministry has been identified as a severe problem. Many Iraqi security forces have been implicated in sectarian violence, most notably the National Police and certain elements of the Iraqi Army. Allegations have emerged during the Baquba offensive that Sunni and Shiite soldiers cooperated with Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias, respectively.[2] Some have even tried to kill American troops. Giving weapons and training to Iraq's security forces in the absence of a national political consensus in Iraq risks inflaming Iraq's conflicts. In fact, the violence has escalated at the same time as the number of trained Iraqi security forces has increased.

> ➢ **Iraq's government has used Iraqi security forces to promote their sectarian interests rather than the national interest.** Most troubling is the manner in which the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has used the Iraqi security forces. He has focused primarily on going after Sunni insurgents with Iraqi forces, leaving the impression that he is acting on behalf of Shi'a sectarian interests. Worse still, officials in the prime minister's office have often replaced officers that are perceived as competent and non-sectarian.

> ➢ **Force protection concerns for the United States.** The ISG's training recommendation suffers from two more flaws: force protection and time. The number of troops dedicated to protecting American advisors from insurgents would drain resources needed to perform other missions crucial to U.S. interests such as counterterrorism. In addition, many experts observe that it takes years if not decades to train a professional, competent army. Past experiences of unpopular foreign military forces facing an insurgency while training local security forces do not inspire confidence in the success of future efforts. There is no reason to presume we will be able to do any better even if we had unlimited time in Iraq (which we don't).

5. Offering undeveloped ideas on a regional diplomatic offensive.

The ISG proposed creating a regional contact group to help solve Iraq's internal and external problems diplomatically. While it is important for the United States to undertake a diplomatic offensive as it begins a phased redeployment from Iraq, the ISG approach is too broad.

Rather than dealing with Iraq's multiple internal conflicts as discrete problems that require separate attention, the ISG approach could result in a "one-size-fits-all" diplomatic package. Progressives should recognize that each of Iraq's neighbors have differing interests in each of Iraq's conflicts, and then advocate that the United States tailor its diplomacy to each conflict in an attempt to deal individually with the myriad problems confronting Iraq.

Conclusion

Progressives should not allow the recommendations of the ISG report to be accepted without question. Nor should they allow the White House to legitimate its still-stay-the-course policy by paying lip service to the ISG recommendations.

Rather, progressives should advocate a policy that allows us to strategically reset our military forces, our diplomatic personnel, and our intelligence operations by redeploying out troops in 12 months, partitioning our diplomatic effort to better deal with Iraq's multiple conflict, rethinking our approach to Iraq's government and its security forces, and redirecting our immense national power toward destroying those terrorists who attacked us on 9/11. The time is past for more half-way measures.

The United States needs to move toward a "Strategic Reset" of its policy in Iraq and the Middle East, one that recognizes the increasingly fragmented situation on the ground and build a more sustainable approach to advancing long-term U.S. interests in the region.

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[1] Lauren Frayer, "U.S. Forces 'On Hold' for Iraqi Partners," *The Washington Post,* July 6, 2007, *available at* http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/06/AR2007070601824.html.

[2] Sam Dagher, "U.S. faced with Iraqi Army turncoats," *Christian Science Monitor,* July 10, 2007, *available at* http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0710/p07s02-woiq.html.