

# Center for American Progress



**To:** The Incoming 110<sup>th</sup> Congress  
**From:** John Podesta, Lawrence Korb, and Brian Katulis  
Center for American Progress  
**Re:** The Critical Choice in Iraq: A Diplomatic Surge and a Strategic  
Redeployment or Military Escalation  
**Date:** December 27, 2006

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## Executive Summary

As 2006 draws to a close, the United States faces a critical choice: a new strategy for regaining stability and making progress in the Middle East, or a military escalation in Iraq. President Bush sets the national security agenda, but the incoming 110<sup>th</sup> Congress will play a key role in helping shape the country's deliberations over this critical choice. To us, the choices are clear:

- **Promote a Diplomatic Surge and Oppose Military Escalation.** For the past month, the Iraq debate has been dominated by discussion of a possible military escalation, or the so-called “surge” option. Choosing this path would be simply doubling down on a failed strategy. Since last June, the United States tried a similar military escalation twice in Baghdad, and there is no compelling evidence indicating that a third time would be a charm. Rather than sinking deeper into Iraq's civil war, the United States should undertake a fundamental strategic shift centered on a political and diplomatic surge aimed at resolving Iraq's civil war and stabilizing other parts of the Middle East.
- **Ignore the Advice from Those Responsible for the Iraq Quagmire.** Supporters of U.S. military escalation in Iraq in 2007 are among the same pundits and so-called experts who assured the president that the U.S. invasion was necessary; that the war would be a cakewalk; that we would be greeted as liberators; that we could rebuild Iraq at a cost of \$1.5 billion a year; and that we could reduce our troop strength to 30,000 by the end of 2003. These pundits fail to recognize some key realities: that the fundamental security challenge in Iraq is a violent struggle for power; that the United States cannot solve Iraq's problems militarily; and that the U.S. presence is fostering a culture of dependency and increasing the violence.

- **Exercise the Proper Constitutional Role of Congress in Guiding Iraq Policy.** When Congress reconvenes, the Bush administration will submit a supplemental funding request to the defense budget of at least \$100 billion to fund the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan through the end of FY 2007. Although the new Congress should not refuse to provide the funds that the troops already in Iraq and Afghanistan need, it can place an amendment on the supplemental funding bill that states that if the administration wants to increase the number of troops in Iraq above 150,000, it must provide a plan for their purpose and require an up or down vote on exceeding that number. In addition, it can place limits on the mobilization of Guard and Reserve forces, and vote on key aspects of U.S. funding, including U.S. taxpayer money that is going to provide weapons and training to Iraqi security forces. At minimum, Congress should increase its oversight and demand a full-blown, detailed plan from the Bush administration on how it is preparing to stabilize Iraq and address the growing problems in the Middle East.

### **The Case for Redeployment**

As President Bush ponders the country's strategic options in Iraq before addressing the nation early next month, the country faces a critical choice: implementing a new strategy for regaining stability and progress in the Middle East to boost our overall national security, or opting for military escalation in what has become a civil war in Iraq.

President Bush can listen to the growing consensus supported by a [majority of Americans](#)<sup>1</sup>, top [U.S. military commanders](#), and the bipartisan [Iraq Study Group](#) led by James Baker and Lee Hamilton. This option includes beginning a phased [strategic redeployment](#) of U.S. troops in 2007 combined with an intensified diplomatic surge to stabilize Iraq and make progress on key Middle East interests.

Or President Bush can once again listen to the advice of some of the same people who got the United States embroiled in the Iraq quagmire in the first place. Those are the ones who again advocate escalating the military conflict in Iraq, or implementing another so-called military "surge," as press headlines have labeled the strategy for much of this past month.

Because of numerous mistakes made during the last 45 months, no good options exist. As the [ISG report](#) noted, the situation in Iraq is "grave and deteriorating," and no one can guarantee that any course of action in Iraq at this point will stop the sectarian warfare, the growing violence, or the ongoing slide toward chaos. Inaction is drift, and even President Bush agrees that sticking with the "current strategy" is not an option.

In 2003, the Bush administration made a fundamental strategic mistake in diverting resources to an unnecessary war of choice in Iraq and leaving the mission unaccomplished in Afghanistan. This error has allowed the Taliban to reconstitute in Afghanistan, weakened the position of the United States in the world, and undermined

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<sup>1</sup> The underlined portions of the electronic version of this document represent hyperlinks to additional sources and articles.

the fighting strength of U.S. ground forces. It also diverted critical U.S. resources from effectively addressing the Iranian nuclear threat, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the situation in Lebanon.

Today, the United States once again finds itself at a strategic crossroads. This time, however, there are seven key lessons of the past four years of failure that make choosing the right path forward abundantly clear. These seven lessons point to the obvious—it is time to strategically redeploy our military forces from Iraq and begin a diplomatic surge.

### **1. The fundamental security challenge in Iraq is a violent struggle for power.**

The United States cannot solve Iraq's problems militarily. No matter how long the United States stays or how many troops are sent, Iraq will never become a stable, peaceful state unless the Iraqis themselves make the painful political compromises necessary to create a new Iraq. These compromises are hard because they involve balancing the power of the provincial and central governments, sharing oil revenues, and protecting minority rights. Only when the reconciliation process is complete will the Iraqis be willing to disband their militias and cease their support for the insurgency.

More than a year after its most recent national election, during which time the United States has [lost the equivalent of 12 battalions killed or wounded soldiers and Marines](#), Iraq's leaders remain internally divided over key questions of political and economic sharing. The national unity government has not achieved sufficient progress on addressing the key questions that drive Iraq's violence. A fundamental challenge in today's Iraq is that too many Iraqi political leaders are hedging their bets: they half-heartedly support the national government while simultaneously maintain their independent power bases through ties to militias and other groups based on sect or ethnicity.

War is the continuation of politics by other means. Since Iraq's current government is neither taking control of the chaos swirling around it nor settling disputes over key issues that might bring an end to the sectarian bloodbath, more and more Iraqis are turning to violence.

Resolving Iraq's civil war requires a new political strategy, such as a peace conference supported by the international community and Iraq's neighbors. Shifting U.S. military tactics toward greater military escalation runs a high risk of only inflaming Iraq's violence and increasing American casualties and Iraqi dependence on the United States.

### **2. The open-ended U.S. combat deployment fosters a culture of dependency in Iraq.**

Iraqi leaders will have no incentive to undertake these painful steps unless the United States and the international community apply significant pressure on Iraq's leaders. The best way to press Iraq's leaders is to set a plan that aims to complete the U.S. military mission by a certain date, thereby creating incentives for Iraq's leaders to settle their

disputes and assume greater control of the country. Given our moral obligation to the Iraqis and the practical considerations involved in redeploying 150,000 troops, a reasonable target date for completing the U.S. combat mission should be 18 months from now, or the summer of 2008. If the Iraqis do not make these difficult choices over the next 18 months, they will have to live with the consequences. It would then be their problem, not ours.

In the weeks before his dismissal, even [former Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld](#), a fervent supporter of staying the course and only standing down when the Iraqis stand up, and a key figure responsible for the Iraq quagmire, finally admitted that last October, “The biggest mistake would be not to pass things over to the Iraqis. It’s their country. They are going to have to govern it, they’re going to have to provide security for it, and they’re going to have to do it sooner rather than later.”

Military escalation, or a so-called “surge” of additional U.S. troops, would only continue to prevent Iraqis from taking greater responsibility and settling their disputes.

### **3. Iraq’s neighbors are already involved in Iraq and must be part of the solution.**

Iraq’s six neighbors—Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait—are already involved in some fashion in Iraq. This involvement is bilateral, self-interested, disorganized, and not channeled toward a constructive purpose that benefits the common good of all Iraqis, in large part because of the internal divisions among Iraqis on full display in the daily violence in Iraq’s streets. Moreover, the spillover effects of Iraq’s civil war on the region have been growing throughout 2006, with Jordan and Syria receiving a flood of Iraqis fleeing the violence. Leaders throughout the region, not only on Iraq’s borders, fear the ripple effects of the chaos on their immediate horizons.

To end Iraq’s civil war, the country’s neighbors need to be involved more constructively. These countries have an incentive to participate, and one way to increase those incentives is to send a clear signal that the United States is setting a target date for completing its military mission in Iraq. None of the countries in the region want to see an Iraq that becomes a failed state or a humanitarian catastrophe that would lead to it becoming a haven for terrorists or sending millions of more refugees streaming into their countries.

Even U.S. adversaries such as Syria and Iran will have to alter their policies once the United States begins to redeploy its military forces from Iraq. Both countries recognize that with the United States mired in the Iraq quagmire, it has reduced its ability to confront Damascus and Tehran. These countries will continue to have every incentive to work together to keep U.S. forces bleeding.

Moreover, despite the fact that Syria and Iran do have different agendas than the United States and are contributing to the problems in Iraq, both of these nations have demonstrated a willingness to act in their own self-interest even if the United States is also a beneficiary. For example, in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the Syrians contributed troops to the American-led coalition that evicted Iraq from Kuwait. In 2001, the Iranians

worked with us by providing extensive assistance on intelligence, logistics, diplomacy, and Afghan internal politics that helped to oust the Taliban from Afghanistan. The Iranians also developed roads and power projects and dispersed more than \$300 million of the \$560 million it pledged to help the Karzai government. Moreover, in 2003, the Iranians sent Washington a detailed proposal for comprehensive negotiations to resolve bilateral differences.

[Secretary of State Rice's recent refusal](#) to deal with Syria and Iran not only harms U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East—it is deadly. To refuse to talk to Syria and Iran unless they change their foreign policies means that many Americans will die needlessly. This lack of confidence in the U.S. ability to assert its interests diplomatically only further weakens the U.S. position in the Middle East.

As 2006 draws to a close, the absence of a new diplomatic and political strategy is a missing link in getting Iraq's neighbors to play a more constructive role.

#### **4. The U.S. must deploy its full diplomatic weight to address the problems in Iraq and the Middle East.**

A new political and diplomatic surge is necessary to address Iraq's civil war and the growing instability in the Middle East. So far, the United States has not deployed all of the assets in its arsenal to address the growing strategic challenges in the Middle East. It is still relying too much on its military power rather than integrating its military component with the diplomatic component.

As the Bush administration heads into its last two years of office, key spaces on its diplomatic bench remain unfilled. Secretary of State Rice has operated [without a Deputy Secretary of State](#) since last July, the [U.S. ambassador to the United Nations resigned](#), the [U.S. ambassador to Iraq is leaving](#), and the United States has not had an [ambassador in Syria](#) for nearly two years.

The Bush administration should send a signal of its seriousness by appointing an individual with the stature such as that of former Secretaries of State Colin Powell or Madeleine Albright as special Middle East envoys. Former presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush have advanced U.S. interests and improved U.S. position by addressing the aftermath of the 2004 Asian tsunami. Individuals like Colin Powell and Madeleine Albright can help the United States address the geo-strategic tsunami that has been unfolding in Iraq and the Middle East during the past four years.

As special envoys, the former secretaries could spearhead a new, forceful diplomatic offensive aimed at achieving peace in Iraq and making progress on other key fronts in the Middle East, including efforts to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the role of Hezbollah and Syria in Lebanon, Iran's rising influence in the region, and the concerns that many traditional allies, such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, have about the shifting dynamics in the region.

This diplomatic surge must also focus on getting support and assistance from other global powers like European countries to provide more political and economic support in Iraq than they have over the last four years. U.S. diplomats must make clear to the world that no nation anywhere in the world can escape the consequences of continued chaos in the Middle East.

##### **5. U.S. military escalation in Iraq will not make Iraq more secure.**

Doubling down on a bad hand as we have done repeatedly by sending more troops to Iraq will not change the outcome. Recent statements by President Bush and other top officials that the United States is “not winning but not losing,” are misleading. In asymmetrical guerilla warfare, the insurgents win if the occupying power does not. The situation in Iraq has reached a point at which even former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, a leading advocate of invading and staying the course, has acknowledged that [military victory is no longer possible in Iraq.](#)

An additional 30,000 troops would represent a marginal increase in the U.S. combat presence in Iraq, not a decisive number. Even if the United States had the necessary number of men and women with the technical and language skills available to operate as a true stabilizing force or to embed with the Iraqi units—which it does not—the additional troops would likely be unable to significantly improve Iraq’s security situation, certainly not without a major shift in political and diplomatic strategy.

At the end of 2006, Iraq now has more than 300,000 members in its security forces which do not lack the necessary training to quell the violence. In fact, some of them have more training than the young soldiers and Marines the United States has sent to Iraq. Iraq’s security forces are not tasked with fighting a major conventional war against a significant military power. Rather, what they need to do is essentially police work to stop Iraqis from killing other Iraqis.

The central problem with Iraq’s security forces is not skill building or training. It is motivation and allegiance. Most of the 10 divisions in the Iraqi Army are not multiethnic. They are staffed and led by members of their own sect. The problem is that the units are reluctant to take military action against members of their own groups who are perpetrating the violence.

Case in point: Only two of the six Iraqi battalions ordered to Baghdad this fall by the Maliki government actually showed up. Moreover, many of the security forces have been infiltrated by the insurgents and criminals who tip off the enemy and that are supervised by corrupt and incompetent ministers who purge the most effective commanders. As a result, the units then often employ the weapons and tactics furnished by the United States against their sectarian enemies, not those of the Iraqi state.

During the last six months the United States has increased, or “surged,” the number of American troops in Baghdad by 12,000, yet the violence and deaths of Americans and Iraqis has climbed alarmingly, averaging 960 a week since the latest troop increase. This

“surge,” known as Operation Together Forward, failed to stem the violence. This past October, [Army Major General William Caldwell IV said](#) that the operation “has not met our overall expectations of sustaining a reduction in the levels of violence.”

As U.S. military commanders in Iraq have acknowledged, the United States could put a soldier or Marine on every street corner in Baghdad and it would not make a difference if the Iraqis have not begun the reconciliation process.

Sending more troops now will only increase the Iraqi dependence on us, deplete our own strategic reserve, force the United States to extend the tours of those already deployed, send back soldiers and Marines who have not yet spent at least a year at home, and deploy units that are not adequately trained or equipped for the deployments. Colin Powell, the former Secretary of Defense and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, summarized the situation on December 19, 2006, when he said that the active Army was just about broken and he saw nothing to justify an increase in troops.

Powell’s comments echo those of Lt. General Peter Chiarelli, the Commander of the Multi-National Corps in Iraq, who said that [deploying more U.S. forces will not solve Iraqis problems](#).

A U.S. military escalation will not tackle these core problems and would likely further exacerbate the situation and make the challenges more difficult to address.

## **6. U.S. military escalation in Iraq would undermine the fight against global terrorist networks.**

The brave soldiers and Marines are not fighting the violent extremists who supported the attacks of September 11. They are essentially refereeing a civil war. It is time to deploy U.S. military assets where a real military surge is desperately needed, like Afghanistan.

As President Reagan found out in Lebanon in the 1980s, U.S. military forces cannot serve as a referee in a civil war. It is a no-win situation militarily. The United States will end up serving as little more than a lightning rod for the blame. According to [recent measures of Iraqi public sentiment](#), more than 80 percent of the Iraqis believe that American troops are responsible for the violence and 60 percent think it is acceptable to kill Americans. A majority of Iraqis want U.S. troops out of the country within a year.

If Iraqi leaders veto requests by U.S. military commanders to take on Shiite militias as happened this fall, and if Iraqi judges are frequently demanding the release of captured insurgents, U.S. troops will continue to face an impossible situation—no matter how qualified and motivated they are. As [Sen. Gordon Smith \(R-OR\)](#) recently noted, a policy that has U.S. soldiers and Marines patrolling the same streets in the same way and being blown up by the same bombs day after day is absurd.

The al-Qaeda insurgents are no longer the main problem in Iraq. Military intelligence estimates they make up less than two percent to three percent of those causing the chaos.

Only five percent of the Iraqis support the philosophy of al-Qaeda, and once U.S. forces leave, the Iraqis will turn against al-Qaeda as they have in the past. The vast majority of the violence is caused by nearly two dozen Shiite militias and Sunni insurgents who are maiming and killing each other mainly because of religious differences that go back over a thousand years. Meanwhile, the real al-Qaeda problem in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia is not being addressed.

A phased redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq should include leaving an Army brigade in Kuwait, and a Marine Expeditionary Force and a carrier battle group in the Persian Gulf. This force will have sufficient military power to prevent Iraq from becoming a haven for al-Qaeda or being invaded by its neighbors. A good example of how this would work is illustrated by the killing of Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Iraqi citizens provided the intelligence to Iraqi security forces, who in turn informed us. The United States then sent F-16's to bomb the hideout, something that we could do after we implement a strategic redeployment.

## **7. Proponents for U.S. military escalation got us into the Iraq quagmire.**

President Bush should ignore the advice of those who got him into this mess in the first place and pay attention to those who cautioned him not to get involved in this misadventure, among them Colin Powell, Brent Scowcroft, Al Gore, Barack Obama, and Ike Skelton.

Supporters of U.S. military escalation in Iraq in 2007 are among the same pundits and so called experts who assured the president that the U.S. invasion was necessary; that the war would be a cakewalk; that we would be greeted as liberators; that we could rebuild Iraq at a cost of \$1.5 billion a year; and that we could reduce our troop strength to 30,000 by the end of 2003.

Now many of these same pundits, who apparently seem to have no sense of shame about their previous errors, are telling him to ignore the bipartisan recommendations of the Iraq Study Group to begin to withdraw troops, open a regional dialogue with Iran and Syria, and take a comprehensive diplomatic approach to the region. Instead, they want to throw more good money after bad, by sending up to 50,000 more troops to achieve victory in Iraq, i.e. a stable democratic Iraq that will transform the Middle East. Those who got it wrong before include:

- [Professor Eliot Cohen](#) of Johns Hopkins University, who was invited to the White House on December 11, 2006, said that the process and the substance of the ISG report were flawed and urged the president to make a substantial troop increase. Yet before the invasion, Cohen argued that there were plenty of reasons to “know” that the Iraqis were developing weapons of mass destruction and therefore a bona fide *casus belli* existed. Moreover, Cohen argued that the U.S. did not need U.N. authorization to use force against Iraq.

- [Richard Perle](#), Chairman of the Defense Policy Board at the time of the invasion. He called the ISG report absurd and dismissed the panel as a misadventure. This is the same Richard Perle who believed that Iraq was a good candidate for democratic reform and that Ahmed Chalabi, the Iraqi exile who had not been in Baghdad since the Dodgers were in Brooklyn, knew what he was talking about.
- Retired Army General Jack Keane, the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army for General Shinseki, another recent White House visitor. He gave the ISG report an “F,” calling it a cover story to accept defeat. He now recommends sending 40,000 more troops to secure Baghdad. Yet, when his boss, Gen. Shinseki, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee before the invasion that several hundred thousand troops would be needed to secure Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Keane was publicly silent and later had to admit to the House Armed Services Committee that the Army was not properly prepared and organized to deal with the insurgency. The reason, he said, was that he was seduced by the Iraqi exiles in terms of what the outcome of the invasion would be.
- [Fred Kagan](#) has put forward a plan for Iraq that includes surging 35,000 more troops for two years to succeed. Yet in late February 2003, Kagan urged the president not to delay the invasion of Iraq because Saddam had not complied with international agreements to eliminate weapons of mass destruction. He said this even though the UN inspectors who had been in Iraq for the preceding two months had not found any weapons.

President Bush should ignore the advice of those who have such a poor track record in Iraq and make a shift to a fundamentally new strategy.

### **The 110<sup>th</sup> Congress: A Responsibility to Assert its Constitutional Role on Iraq**

When Congress reconvenes, the Bush administration will submit a supplemental funding request to the defense budget of [at least \\$100 billion](#) to fund the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan through the end of FY 2007. This is in addition to the \$70 billion bridge fund Congress has already provided, bringing the total cost of the wars for this fiscal year to \$170 billion, more than \$14 billion a month, the vast majority of which is for Iraq.

Although the new Congress should provide the funds that the troops already in Iraq and Afghanistan need, there are four steps that the Congress can take to ensure that the administration and the country do not make more poor choices in Iraq:

First and foremost, it can place an amendment on the supplemental funding bill that states that if the administration wants to increase the number of troops in Iraq above 150,000, it must provide a plan for their purpose and require an up or down vote on exceeding that

number. This provision is consistent with the [War Powers Act](#) passed overwhelmingly some three decades ago.

Second, the Congress should enact legislation that clarifies the law that allows the president to mobilize Guard and Reserve units for up to two years. The Congress should make it clear that the law does not allow the total mobilization to exceed two years in total, even if they are not consecutive.

Third, the Congress should decide what weapons and equipment that can be provided to particular units in the Iraqi security forces and tighten procedures for tracking any future weapons transfers. A recent [report by the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction](#) raised concerns about the procedures for tracking hundreds of thousands of weapons given to Iraqi security forces.

Finally, Congress should increase its oversight on all aspects of Iraq policy by holding regular hearings on key unresolved problems and carefully assessing all nominees to fill the many gaps that exist in the Bush administration's diplomatic team.

## **Conclusion**

The United States cannot wait for the next president to resolve the problems in Iraq. In fact, we have already waited too long. The 110<sup>th</sup> Congress has a special responsibility to assert its constitutional role and make sure that the Bush administration does not sink the country deeper into Iraq's civil war.

A U.S. military escalation in Iraq holds little hope for stabilizing the country, risks doing permanent damage to U.S. ground forces, and would undermine U.S. efforts to defeat the global terrorist networks that attacked the U.S. on 9/11. Choosing this course would be, as Sen. Smith notes, absurd and maybe even immoral. The only responsible path forward is a new, forceful strategy that marshals the right assets for the challenges the United States faces in Iraq, in the Middle East, and around the world.