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Congress's Call for Iraq Withdrawal Undermines the U.S.-British Alliance

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The Senate's decision to support a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq undermines and weakens the Anglo-American special relationship and U.S.-U.K. leadership on the world stage. Following a 218-208 House vote calling for a withdrawal timetable, the Senate voted by 51 to 46 this week to approve a war-spending bill that would force the exit of American forces starting in October 2007, with a target for complete withdrawal from Iraq by March 31, 2008. This vote sends the wrong message at a time when American and British personnel are engaged in defending Iraq's fledgling democracy.

Congress is sending a clear signal of defeat to America's enemies in Iraq and across the world, which undercuts the United State's closest ally, Great Britain, as well as the Iraqi government. This astonishing move will undermine morale in the international coalition in Iraq and, if enacted, would make Britain's position in southern Iraq untenable.

In sharp contrast, Britain's House of Commons has not voted for a timetabled withdrawal of British forces from Iraq, and both of the U.K.'s largest political parties, Labour and Conservative, remain committed to maintaining forces in the country. There is a clear difference between the resolve of Britain's Parliament regarding Iraq and the defeatist approach of elements in the U.S. Congress.

The war in Iraq is not only America's war, it is Britain's too, and the United Kingdom has played a major role in bringing relative peace and stability to huge swathes of southern Iraq in the face of intense meddling by Iran. A total of 45,000 British troops participated in the liberation of Iraq, roughly two-

fifths of the British Army, and by any measure a staggering contribution for a nation of Britain's size. One hundred and forty-five British servicemen have died for their country in Iraq.

Britain Is Not Pulling Out. British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced in February that British troop numbers would be cut this summer from 7,100 to 5,000. This will allow Britain to send an additional 1,500 troops to southern Afghanistan, for a total of 7,000, to fight the Taliban. The move is a reflection of mounting commitments in other theaters of the war on terrorism, as well as significant progress in training Iraqi security forces. It does not, as some U.S. politicians have claimed, represent a cut-and-run strategy in Iraq, where the British continue to command the Multi-National South East Division.

Blair's initial announcement has been ruthlessly exploited for political gain by those in Congress who saw it as a convenient battering ram to use against Washington's Iraq policy. There is in fact a huge gulf between the long-term vision for Iraq of British defense chiefs and the short-sighted approach adopted by anti-war politicians on Capitol Hill.

Downing Street has flatly rejected a timetable for the complete withdrawal of British forces and

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remains committed to working with Iraqi forces to advance security in the south of the country. Blair's likely successor, Gordon Brown, has given no public indication that he will reverse British policy on Iraq. According to British defense sources, the U.K. plans to maintain several thousand troops in the country for another 5 years, with a projected battle group based west of Basra until 2012.¹

Dangerous Consequences.

- **A Propaganda Victory for Al-Qaeda and Its Allies:** Al-Qaeda would portray a U.S.-U.K. pull-out as a massive victory. An early withdrawal would embolden al-Qaeda's terrorist network in Iraq and provide a huge boost to the insurgency. Al-Qaeda would link any British withdrawal to the July 7, 2005, London bombings, for which it has claimed responsibility, and assert that the attacks forced a change in British policy. This would set a dangerous precedent and greatly increase the likelihood of future terrorist atrocities on European soil.
- **Civil War, Ethnic Cleansing, and a Humanitarian Crisis:** The withdrawal of American, British, and other Western forces would pave the way for a civil war between Sunni and Shia groups, with bloodshed on a far greater scale than witnessed so far. Hundreds of thousands or millions could be displaced by ethnic cleansing, leading to a huge humanitarian crisis. Large numbers of Iraqis would inevitably lose their lives.
- **The Boosting of Iran's Power:** Iran would be a geostrategic beneficiary of a British pullout from Shiite-dominated southern Iraq, where it already wields great political influence. A British withdrawal from Basra and its southern bases would create a power vacuum that dozens of Iranian-backed militia groups are ready to exploit—among them, Moqtada Sadr's Mahdi Army, the Badr Brigades, and the Mujahidin for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Tehran is already waging a proxy

war against U.S., British, and Iraqi forces. There is growing evidence that Iranian factories run by the Revolutionary Guard are producing roadside bombs that are killing British soldiers in southern Iraq and that Iran is actively financing and training Shia militias.²

Conclusion. The U.S. and Britain must remain united in their determination to continue the fight against terrorism in Iraq. An early withdrawal of British or American troops would have catastrophic implications for the future of the country and would be seen by many Iraqis as a betrayal of trust. By liberating Iraq and removing one of the most brutal regimes of modern times, Britain and the United States made a powerful commitment to the future of the Iraqi people that must be honored. There should be no major pullout of Allied forces from the country until key military objectives have been met and Iraq is stable and secure.

The U.S. and the U.K. share a fundamental national interest in remaining in Iraq to defeat the insurgency. The Middle East would view an early withdrawal as a humiliating defeat for the West and an emphatic victory for those who represent al-Qaeda in Iraq. A pullout would be an unparalleled propaganda success for a barbaric terror organization that has murdered thousands of Iraqi men, women, and children.

Iraq today is the central battleground in the global war against terrorism and, together with Afghanistan, is one of the only places in the world where American and British troops can actively engage al-Qaeda and its allies on the battlefield. Iraq tests the West's resolve to confront and ultimately defeat the al-Qaeda threat, and this epic confrontation must be fought and won by U.S., British, and Iraqi forces.

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2. Toby Harnden, "Three Iranian Factories 'Mass-Produce Bombs to Kill British in Iraq,'" *The Daily Telegraph*, August 21, 2006, at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/08/20/wiraq20.xml. See also Matthew Moore and Paul Willis, "Blair Accuses Iran After Four Troops Killed," *The Daily Telegraph*, May 4, 2007, at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/04/05/wiraq105.xml.