

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1461
May 18, 2007

Iraq Benchmarks Should be Realistic Goals, Not a Means To Surrender

James Phillips

Congress continues to wrestle with the Bush Administration over overdue emergency funding for the war in Iraq, with opponents of the Administration's surge strategy seeking to transform proposed benchmarks for measuring progress in Iraq into mechanisms for forcing the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Rigid benchmarks would become an excuse for pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq, rather than a means to help Iraqis build a stable and secure country. If Congress insists on inserting rigid, binding benchmarks linked to U.S. troop levels into legislation funding the war effort, President Bush should veto the bill. No President can afford to accept congressional usurpation of his constitutional authority as commander in chief of the armed forces, a precedent that would hamstring the U.S. war effort not only in Iraq, but also in possible future wars. Tying benchmarks to a reduction of U.S. aid to the Iraqi government is also a bad idea but may be a necessary concession for the Administration due to the political mood in Congress.

Give Petraeus a Chance. Congress's imposing arbitrary deadlines and benchmarks in Iraq would deprive the President and his military commanders of the flexibility, time, and resources needed to successfully wage war. General David Petraeus, the senior U.S. commander in Iraq who played a key role in developing the Bush Administration's surge strategy, was confirmed by a vote of 81-0 in the Senate in January. But now, before the surge has even been completed, he faces second-guessing from politically motivated legislators thousands of miles away from the Iraqi battlefield. The final brigade to

be deployed as part of the initial surge will not reach Iraq until June. Yet some in Congress appear eager to declare the surge a failure before it has been fully implemented.

Many of the proposed benchmarks for measuring progress in Iraq, such as passage of Iraqi legislation on oil revenues, reform of the de-baathification program, and amending the constitution to assuage nervous Sunnis, depend on the inherently messy process of forging a consensus within the fractious Iraqi parliament. It would be a huge mistake for Congress to halt U.S. military operations if Iraq's young parliament proves to be too slow to meet arbitrary deadlines imposed by impatient American legislators. Such a rush to judgment would amount to a death sentence for Iraq's embryonic democracy.

Progress in Iraq is likely to be painstakingly slow, and congressional meddling calibrated according to political conditions in Washington is not likely to help the situation. Congress must be realistic about the pace and scope of change in Iraq. All observers recognize that national reconciliation is the core issue for determining the future of Iraq. Benchmark proponents argue that their threats to cut off American military operations will somehow spur the Iraqi government to move faster on this goal.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/MiddleEast/wm1461.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

But such threats are much more likely to hamper reconciliation efforts. Security is a necessary prerequisite for reconciliation. Iraq's government, formed a year ago, will not be able to provide security to Iraqis for many months, if not years, without extensive American assistance. Congressional threats to halt that assistance will not spur reconciliation but will strengthen Iraqi hardliners, both Sunni and Shia, at the expense of the moderate center.

Benchmarks could be useful for mapping out goals, but if they are mechanically applied as a hair-trigger for a rapid withdrawal, then they would become counterproductive. Members of Congress who oppose the war should act on their convictions and vote to cut funding, not disingenuously employ "benchmarks" as a means to cloak surrender.

Outlines of a Deal. President Bush has signaled a willingness to accept benchmarks for the Iraqi government that would have consequences for U.S. aid levels to Baghdad, but not for U.S. troop levels. This is still risky. If the benchmarks are set too high, the resulting reduction in U.S. aid would make a bad situation worse. But the President may be forced to take this risk because a growing number of Republicans on Capitol Hill have accepted benchmarks as a means of prodding the Iraqi government to move faster on political reforms and security efforts.

As negotiations with Congress proceed, the White House must seek to retain the greatest degree of flexibility possible in setting aid levels to the Iraqi government. Acceding to unrealistic benchmarks that are mechanically applied to cut U.S. aid runs the risk of demoralizing the Iraqi government and exacerbating factional tensions over the distribution of scarce resources.

In addition to legislative benchmarks, other measurable goals could include the expansion of Iraqi security forces, the rebuilding of public services, the amount of economic development funds allocated to Sunni regions to undercut support for the insurgency, and the net outflow or return of Iraqi refugees from outside the country.

But the single most important benchmark for success in Iraq should be the degree to which American and Iraqi forces can choke off the activities of the al-Qaeda in Iraq organization and its radical Islamic allies. Any policy that reduces pressure on these terrorists, such as the withdrawal of U.S. troops or their redeployment in a manner that reduces their ability to collect actionable intelligence, should be rejected.

Conclusion. Congress cannot legislate war strategy. Congressional leaders do not have the expertise, staff, or constitutional authority to micro-manage a war. American generals in Iraq, not politicians in Washington, should decide how to fight the war. Congress must not use benchmarks as a means of forcing surrender in Iraq, which would have devastating consequences for U.S. national security, the war against terrorism, and stability in the Middle East. If Congress insists on imposing binding benchmarks on U.S. troop levels or mandating a timeline for withdrawal, President Bush should veto the legislation.

James Phillips is Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

