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Senate Effort to Impose Iraq Study Group Recommendations: Unrealistic, Unwise, and Unnecessary

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Senator Ken Salazar (D-CO), Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), and a growing list of other Senators are co-sponsoring an amendment to the defense authorization bill that calls for the implementation of the recommendations of last year's Iraq Study Group (ISG) report. This effort undermines the President's authority as Commander in Chief in the middle of a difficult war and seeks to impose simplistic solutions, based on a lowest common denominator consensus of a Washington-based commission, on a complex conflict thousands of miles away. Moreover, it ignores key conclusions of the commission itself: The ISG warned against the danger of a rapid U.S. troop withdrawal, rejected calls for a withdrawal timetable, and explicitly endorsed a possible surge in U.S. troops if called for by the U.S. commander in Iraq.

Wishful Thinking. The ISG report described a "grave and deteriorating" situation in Iraq but presented a highly optimistic scenario for drawing down U.S. troops and restricting their combat role while addressing the security situation at the margins. Among its 79 prescriptions were a mixture of practical suggestions for accelerating the training of Iraqi security forces; a gradual shift in the primary role of U.S. troops from combat to training Iraqi forces; vague calls for a diplomatic offensive to stabilize Iraq, including dangerous and unrealistic efforts to "engage" Iran and Syria, who seek to sabotage the emergence of a stable democracy in Iraq; and a mixed bag of recommendations for helping

Iraqis to move forward with national reconciliation, political and economic reforms, and broad-based power-sharing.

The proposal to implement the ISG's recommendations (SA 2063) is unrealistic and unwise, because it fails to take into account the security and political situation in Iraq. Rather, it is focused on the political situation in Washington. The amendment does not recognize the disastrous military, geopolitical, and humanitarian consequences that a rapid U.S. troop withdrawal would have in Iraq and the surrounding region.

SA 2603 sets a target date for the withdrawal of U.S. troops that are not deemed necessary for force protection or counterterrorism operations by the end of March 2008. By inflexibly clinging to the same target date as last year's ISG report, the bill greatly accelerates the pace of withdrawal and exacerbates the risks of destabilizing Iraq and the surrounding region. This rush for the exit in Iraq in a little more than 9 months contradicts the ISG report's statement that "We also rejected the immediate withdrawal of our troops, because we believe that so much is at stake."¹

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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Also, SA 2063 is internally inconsistent. Section 1544 (4) calls for the U.S. government to secure the borders of Iraq, which would require far more U.S. troops than the approximately 160,000 troops deployed there now. Section 1544 (11) calls for the U.S. government to assist the Iraqi government in achieving political, military, and economic milestones. But at the same time, the bill diminishes the U.S. government's ability to help Iraq reach these milestones by reducing the number of U.S. troops deployed there and restricting the nature of their operations. If these milestones, many of which were mentioned in the ISG Report, are so important, then why sabotage the ability of the United States to help the Iraqis attain them? And how do the supporters of this bill propose to help Iraqis attain these milestones in the midst of growing insecurity caused by the withdrawal of U.S. troops?

By mandating a "cut and run" strategy, SA 2063 would undermine the security situation in Iraq and reduce the ability of rival political leaders to reach the compromises necessary for national reconciliation. It not only ties the President's hands in the middle of a war and undermines his constitutional authority as the Commander in Chief but also restricts the operational flexibility of military commanders in the Iraq war zone. Such congressional micromanagement is self-defeating.

The bill, which was proposed on June 5 before the surge in troops had been completed and the surge in operations had fully begun, is clearly designed to abort the Bush Administration's new Iraq strategy before the results of that strategy are known. This directly contradicts the ISG report,

which explicitly accepted the idea of a possible surge: "We could, however, support a short-term redeployment or surge of American combat forces to stabilize Baghdad, or to speed up the training and equipping mission, if the U.S. commander in Iraq determines that such steps would be effective."²

Iraq Study Group Co-Chairman James Baker appealed to Congress in January to give General Petraeus's surge strategy a chance to work: "So I guess my bottom line on the surge is, look, the President's plan ought to be given a chance. Give it a chance, because we heard all of this. The general that you confirmed, 81 to nothing, day before yesterday, this is his idea."³

Conclusion: Resist a Rush to Judgment. In the six months since Mr. Baker urged that the surge be given a chance, there have been hopeful signs of progress in the parts of Iraq that the surge strategy has targeted: Baghdad and Anbar Province, a key stronghold of the insurgents. Sectarian violence has fallen in Baghdad, and a coalition of Sunni tribesmen formerly allied to al-Qaeda in Iraq has turned against it in Anbar Province. By and large, however, the overall results of the surge will not be known for many months. Congress should avoid a rush to judgment that could fatally undermine the Bush Administration's surge strategy before the results of the surge have been conclusively evaluated.

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1. The Iraq Study Group Report, 2006, page 73.
 2. The Iraq Study Group Report, 2006, page 73.
 3. Response to a question during a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, January 30, 2007.