

# WebMemo



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## Bush on Iraq: U.S. Troops “Return on Success”

*James Phillips*

President Bush delivered a short but effective speech last night that reviewed the military progress made in Iraq, explained why this progress now allows the beginning of a drawdown of U.S. troops, and reminded Americans of what is at stake in Iraq. He announced that 5,700 of the 21,500 combat troops participating in the “surge” would be home for Christmas, several months before they were scheduled to return. U.S. troops, he stressed, would “return on success” according to the situation in Iraq, not on timetables arbitrarily determined by Washington politicians.

**Gains on the Ground.** The President sought to capitalize on the recent shift of momentum in the Iraq debate caused by the improving military situation in Iraq. This week’s marathon of congressional hearings featuring General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker has helped to crystallize a consensus in Washington that the military situation in Iraq is improving. Now President Bush seeks to move quickly to shore up public support for following through with the new counter-insurgency strategy developed and implemented by General Petraeus.

Bush noted, “Our military commanders believe we can succeed. Our diplomats believe we can succeed. And for the safety of future generations of Americans, we must succeed.” Failure in Iraq would be a victory for al-Qaeda and Iran and a humanitarian catastrophe for the Iraqi people, and it would unleash dangerous forces that would threaten the security of America and its allies.

Much of the President’s speech focused on the hard-won gains in security inside Iraq, particularly in regions where the surge was concentrated: in Baghdad and the surrounding areas, as well as in Anbar Province, a former stronghold of the insurgency. As General Petraeus testified, overall levels of violence are down, particularly in recent weeks. Civilian deaths have declined by 45 percent since December 2006. Car bombings and suicide attacks have steadily declined from 175 in March to 90 last month.

Radical Shia militias have gone to ground and many of their leaders have been killed, captured, or gone into hiding. Al-Qaeda terrorists in Iraq have repeatedly been hit hard and driven out of many of their former sanctuaries. As General Petraeus said, “The military objectives of the surge are, in large measure, being met.”

**Stalled Political Progress.** The debate over Iraq is now shifting from the military situation to how to consolidate the military gains and transform them into political progress. While the surge is increasingly recognized as a success, many wonder if it will clear the way for the sustained Iraqi political reconciliation that is necessary to stabilize Iraq.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm1616.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm1616.cfm)

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President Bush confronted the problem head on: “The government has not met its own legislative benchmarks, and in my meetings with Iraqi leaders, I have made it clear that they must.” He gave little specifics about how this would be done, except to say that “local reconciliation is taking place. The key now is to link this progress in the provinces to progress in Baghdad. As local politics change, so will national politics.”

**Multiple Audiences.** This speech was designed with multiple audiences in mind. The primary audience was the American people, to whom he offered a clear rationale for continuing the war effort: “In Iraq, an ally of the United States is fighting for its survival. Terrorists and extremists who are at war with us around the world are seeking to topple Iraq’s government, dominate the region and attack us here at home.”

For those who argue that the Iraqi struggle is merely a civil war, he invoked 9/11, implicitly reminding his audience that those terrorist attacks came from a country embroiled in civil war that the United States had neglected. “A free Iraq,” the President explained, “will deny al-Qaeda a safe haven” and be a partner to the U.S. in the war on terrorism.

He held out an olive branch to Members of Congress: “Let us come together on a policy of strength in the Middle East. I thank you for providing crucial

funds and resources for our military. And I ask you to join me in supporting the recommendations General Petraeus has made, and the troop levels he has asked for.”

He appealed to Iraq’s “peaceful neighbors” (which excludes Iran and Syria) and to the international community to do more to help the beleaguered Iraqis.

And he ended on a note of determination: “Some say the gains we are making in Iraq come too late. They are mistaken. It is never too late to deal a blow to al-Qaeda. It is never too late to advance freedom. And it is never too late to support our troops in a fight they can win.”

But success depends ultimately on the vicissitudes of Iraqi politics. If Iraqi political leaders continue to squander valuable time, the fanatic Sunni and Shia militants will eventually relight the fuse of a bloody sectarian meltdown. Bush should remind Iraq’s political leaders that if they cannot work out how to live together soon, the next President may not be as committed to carrying a heavy burden to preserve a united Iraq.

—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.