

U.S. Faces Pressure to Pull Troops from Iraq

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As Washington continues its struggle to defeat the insurgency in Iraq, support for the intervention from the American population is diminishing, placing pressure on the Bush administration to begin to withdraw troops from the conflict. The intervention in Iraq suffers from similar failures that led to America's troop withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973. In both instances, the prolonged failure to quell an indigenous insurgency resulted in an unacceptable loss to the American public of troops and resources. As the intervention in Vietnam dragged on without nearing victory, calls for the withdrawal of U.S. troops became so deafening that it finally resulted in a pullout of U.S. forces, resulting in a permanent loss of American influence in the country.

In Iraq, the American population's support for the intervention has dropped, and calls for withdrawal are growing in Congress. Unless Washington is able to turn the tables on Iraq's insurgent force -- a highly unlikely scenario -- it will be forced to limit its involvement in the conflict.

The Path of the Insurgency

Shortly after the U.S. overthrew the government of Saddam Hussein, the insurgency in Iraq was in its early stages. After guerrillas executed their first attacks on U.S. troops, American officials were quick to shrug off publicly signs of a budding insurgent campaign. On July 1, 2003, some three months after the U.S. invasion began, L. Paul Bremer, the U.S. administrator of Iraq at the time, blamed the attacks on the "few remaining individuals who have refused to fit into the new Iraq [and] are becoming more and more desperate."

In the months following that declaration, the insurgency grew more heated and U.S. troops suffered an increase in casualties. Now, about two years after the start of the insurgency, it has grown in size, depth and power. On a daily basis, the insurgency claims U.S. and coalition troops, Iraqi troops and Iraqi civilians, all victims of frequent bomb attacks, drive-by shootings and executions. Classified intelligence recently supplied to the *New York Times* by the Iraqi Interior Ministry revealed that between August 2004 and May 2005, insurgents killed 800 civilians a month, an astonishing number; the source did not reveal the civilian death toll before August 2004. While only some 1,750 U.S. troops have been killed as a result of the two-year long U.S. operation, the number of casualties is more than the American people expected and continues upward at a steady pace.

In late 2003, General John Abizaid, the commander of U.S. Central Command, assured, "I want to emphasize to the people that there is no military

threat in Iraq that can drive us out. We have the best-equipped, best-trained army in the world positioned in the most difficult areas we have to deal with ... They are confident, they are capable, they know what they are doing."

While Abizaid was correct, his statement was always irrelevant to the success of U.S. operations in Iraq. The insurgency is well aware that it cannot defeat the U.S. militarily; this was never its objective. The objective of this insurgency, which is the objective of most guerrilla insurgencies facing an occupational power, is to create conditions of instability for a long enough period of time so that the United States withdraws.

The same strategy succeeded for insurgents in Vietnam, when a combination of attacks from South Vietnamese guerrillas and the North Vietnamese Army affected U.S. public opinion enough for the American people to pressure Washington to withdraw troops. The Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s resulted in a similar victory by an insurgent force, with Afghani guerrillas pushing the Russians out after a protracted guerrilla conflict. And, in Chechnya, guerrillas are still waging this type of campaign against Russian troops.

Dr. Max Manwaring, a research professor of military strategy at the U.S. Army War College, explained to PINR in January 2005 that it is unlikely the U.S. will defeat the insurgency in Iraq. Manwaring highlighted the consistent failure of occupying powers to defeat an indigenous insurgency by showing that his studies of post World War II insurgencies demonstrate that "the more intense and voluminous the military actions of the intervening Western power, the more likely the incumbent government was to lose to the insurgents," and that "the more the intervening power escalated the numbers of its forces in response to a deteriorating situation, the worse [the situation] got."

Now, more than two years after the U.S. invaded Iraq, the U.S. population is beginning to show signs of wear. The steady level of casualties of U.S. troops, the failure to show any significant success in defeating the insurgency, along with the heavy economic burden caused by the entire operation, has led more lawmakers to pressure the Bush administration to begin a troop withdrawal. The administration's difficulties in executing its domestic policies have also hampered its efforts in gaining continued support for its foreign policy.

U.S. Losing its Resolve

In late 2003, Abizaid correctly stated, "The goal of the enemy is not to defeat us militarily. The goal of the enemy is to break the will of the United States of America, to make us leave." In early July 2003, Democratic Senator Carl Levin, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that U.S. forces will occupy Iraq for "a number of years" and therefore the American people "need the patience to stay the course." Yet, as PINR argued on July 9, 2003, "despite such pledges, Iraqi militants are well aware that when dealing with democracies, especially ones with prosperous societies such as the United States and United Kingdom, it is best to create high casualties in order to weaken the resolve of the home populations."

That resolve has been weakened. According to a Gallup poll taken in mid-2003, 76 percent of Americans considered the Iraq intervention "worth it." Now, in June 2005, that same Gallup poll shows that only 42 percent of Americans consider the conflict "worth it." The same poll showed that 59 percent of Americans favor a partial or total withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. And a CBS/*New York Times* poll released on June 16 shows that 51 percent of Americans think Washington should have stayed out of Iraq to begin with. Of course, the American public is still far from demanding a complete withdrawal; indeed, a *Wall Street Journal* poll released on July 14 showed that 57 percent of Americans believe it is important to maintain some troops and economic support in Iraq until the country can govern itself. Yet, it is clear that overall support for the intervention has gone down considerably.

Four lawmakers -- two Republicans and two Democrats -- have introduced a resolution that calls for a U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq beginning in October 2006. On June 16, 41 Democrats from the House of Representatives formed an "Out of Iraq" caucus. In the words of Republican Representative Walter Jones Jr., a conservative who regularly supports the policies of the Bush administration, "After 1,700 deaths, over 12,000 wounded and \$200 billion spent, we believe it is time to have this debate and this discussion. We need to take a fresh look at where we are and where we're going." Thomas Donnelly, a defense analyst with the American Enterprise Institute -- a neoconservative-oriented organization that was a major proponent of the intervention in Iraq -- recently told reporters, "When you have sort of rank-and-file Republicans like Walter Jones questioning the White House on this, I think it's a reflection of the changing political calculus, which is not good for the president and not good for the war."

These actions and statements reflect the early stages of debate on the intervention that will intensify if the operation does not appear to be moving toward some tangible end. The Bush administration is concerned with this trend, explaining why on June 28 the president made a special address to the American people in an attempt to harden their commitment.

Yet what the administration says in public can be very different from what they plan in private. According to a recently leaked classified British document, which has been heavily quoted in the international media, it appears that the Bush administration is considering plans to withdraw U.S. troops in 2006.

The document, written by British Defense Secretary John Reid to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, reveals that, "There is a strong U.S. military desire for significant force reductions." It further explains, "Emerging U.S. plans assume 14 out of 18 provinces could be handed over to Iraqi control by early 2006, allowing a reduction in [Allied troops] from 176,000 down to 66,000. There is, however, a debate between the Pentagon/Centcom, who favor a relatively bold reduction in force numbers, and the multinational force in Iraq, whose approach is more cautious."

Much of this stems from the makeup of the U.S. military. The U.S. military, which is composed of an all-volunteer force, is not suited to handle large-scale missions for extended periods of time. In order to handle this mission, Washington has relied heavily on the Army's Reserves and National Guard units,

and this has had an effect on the U.S. military's ability to recruit new soldiers since all new recruits know that they will likely serve a tour of duty in Iraq -- a commitment many potential recruits are unwilling to make. The National Guard, for instance, missed its recruiting goals for 2003 and 2004, and has now missed its recruiting goal for at least the ninth straight month in June; the Guard makes up more than one-third of U.S. forces in Iraq. Both the Reserves and the Active Duty force are also behind their recruiting goals for 2005. These series of issues make Washington's present troop commitment to Iraq unsustainable over the long-term.

Additionally, with U.S. deployments concentrated in Iraq, the military is overextended, decreasing the chances that Washington will begin a new operation elsewhere in the world; this creates a situation where states that pursue strategies at odds with U.S. interests are less concerned with the prospect of a U.S. military response.

Implications of a U.S. Withdrawal

A U.S. withdrawal from Iraq could affect U.S. interests negatively. It would serve as an example of Washington's repeated difficulty in winning guerrilla conflicts. From its withdrawal from Vietnam to its withdrawal from Somalia, the United States has had consistent problems in handling and defeating insurgents in their home countries. A withdrawal from Iraq could embolden future insurgencies.

A U.S. withdrawal could also lead to a civil war in Iraq among the country's Sunni Kurds, Sunni Arabs and Shi'a Arabs. Such a disturbance could spill over into the rest of the region and threaten the world's energy supplies, a development that would damage the economies of all oil-dependent countries.

In the case of such a withdrawal, Washington will likely argue that Iraqi troops, trained by the U.S.-led coalition, are in a position to replace U.S. troops in combating the insurgency. Of course, it is difficult to believe that coalition-trained Iraqi troops will be able to succeed where U.S. troops failed and at the same time produce a result that runs parallel to U.S. interests. For this reason, it cannot be expected that Iraqi troops will be able to prevent a civil war from occurring or that they will have any significant effect on weakening the insurgency.

Nevertheless, under this scenario, leftover troops from the U.S.-led coalition would probably station themselves in a number of military bases around the country. The purpose of this redeployment would be to provide logistics and military support to Iraq's security services. This plan is possible because, unlike its intervention in Vietnam, the United States does not face an organized state military as an opponent. Instead, it only must repel attacks from guerrilla forces, which is no small feat in itself. The presence would also serve as a warning to Iraq's neighboring states not to interfere in Iraqi affairs. Furthermore, it would allow Washington to use Iraq as a staging point for other operations in the Middle East, which was one of the reasons behind the intervention to begin with.

On the other hand, it may be more disadvantageous for the U.S. to remain in Iraq. The intervention has revealed the extent of the U.S. military's power, demonstrating that Washington does not have the military forces necessary to

engage in protracted insurgent warfare. The conflict has damaged Washington's troop recruiting goals, forced it to pull troops from countries such as South Korea to redeploy them in Iraq, and has kept its forces on undesirably long tours of duty. These losses are partially responsible for today's current trend toward multipolarity, since regional powers, such as China, India, Russia and Brazil, along with smaller powers such as North Korea and Iran, deduce that Washington is too engaged in Iraq to be in any real position to block their geopolitical moves. By cutting its losses in Iraq, the United States can begin to recover some of its strength and its ability to better influence regional powers.

Conclusion

The Bush administration finds itself in a difficult position since both courses of action -- enduring the insurgency or withdrawing from it -- have clear negative consequences. Yet, if operations in Iraq continue along their current progression, Washington will be forced to pull its troops out. The United States does not have the troop strength or the political will to conduct its current scope of operations for years to come. Only two years into the intervention, calls from the American people and from lawmakers to withdraw U.S. troops are growing in force. More importantly, unlike Vietnam, the United States has not resorted to conscription, a decision that has resulted in the overextension of the military. It took the United States four years of fighting until it began to extricate its forces from the conflict in Vietnam; in Iraq, expect that time frame to be shorter.

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