

President Bush Discusses Iraq

Cross Hall 11:24 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good morning. Fifteen months ago, I announced the surge. And this week, General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker gave Congress a detailed report on the results.

The immediate goal of the surge was to bring down the sectarian violence that threatened to overwhelm the government in Baghdad, restore basic security to Iraqi communities, and drive the terrorists out of their safe havens. As General Petraeus told Congress, American and Iraqi forces have made significant progress in all these areas. While there is more to be done, sectarian violence is down dramatically. Civilian deaths and military deaths are also down. Many neighborhoods once controlled by al Qaeda have been liberated. And cooperation from Iraqis is stronger than ever -- more tips from residents, more Iraqis joining their security forces, and a growing movement against al Qaeda called the "Sons of Iraq."

Improvements in security have helped clear the way for political and economic developments described by Ambassador Crocker. These gains receive less media coverage, but they are vital to Iraq's future. At the local level, businesses are re-opening and provincial councils are meeting. At the national level, there's much work ahead, but the Iraqi government has passed a budget and three major "benchmark" laws. The national government is sharing oil revenues with the provinces. And many economic indicators in Iraq -- from oil production to inflation -- are now pointed in the right direction.

Serious and complex challenges remain in Iraq, from the presence of al Qaeda to the destructive influence of Iran, to hard compromises needed for further political progress. Yet with the surge, a major strategic shift has occurred. Fifteen months ago, America and the Iraqi government were on the defensive; today, we have the initiative. Fifteen months ago, extremists were sowing sectarian violence; today, many mainstream Sunni and Shia are actively confronting the extremists. Fifteen months ago, al Qaeda had bases in Iraq that it was using to kill our troops and terrorize the Iraqi people; today, we have put al Qaeda on the defensive in Iraq, and we're now working to deliver a crippling blow. Fifteen months ago, Americans were worried about the prospect of failure in Iraq; today, thanks to the surge, we've renewed and revived the prospect of success.

With this goal in mind, General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker have submitted recommendations on the way forward. After detailed discussions with my national security team, including the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I've accepted these recommendations.

The recommendation likely to receive the most attention is on troop levels. General Petraeus has reported that security conditions have improved enough to withdraw all five surge brigades by the end of July. That means that by July 31st, the number of U.S. combat brigades in Iraq will be down by 25 percent from last year.

Beyond that, General Petraeus says he'll need time to consolidate his forces and assess how this reduced American presence will affect conditions on the ground before

making measured recommendations on further reductions. And I've told him he'll have all the time he needs.

Some have suggested that this period of evaluation will be a "pause." That's misleading, because none of our operations in Iraq will be on hold. Instead, we will use the months ahead to take advantage of opportunities created by the surge -- and continue operations across the board.

All our efforts are aimed at a clear goal: a free Iraq that can protect its people, support itself economically, and take charge of its own political affairs. No one wants to achieve this goal more than the Iraqis themselves. Those who say that the way to encourage further progress is to back off and force the Iraqis to fend for themselves are simply wrong. The Iraqis are a proud people who understand the enormity of the challenges they face and are anxious to meet them. But they know that they still need our help until they can stand by themselves. Our job in the period ahead is to stand with the Iraqi government as it makes tough choices and makes the transition to responsibility for its own security and its own destiny.

So what will this transition look like? On the security front, thanks to the significant progress General Petraeus reported this week, it is clear that we're on the right track. In the period ahead, we will stay on the offense against the enemy. As we speak, U.S. Special Forces are launching multiple operations every night to capture or kill al Qaeda leaders in Iraq. Coalition and Iraqi forces are also stepping up conventional operations against al Qaeda in northern Iraq, where terrorists have concentrated after being largely pushed from central and western Iraq. And Prime Minister Maliki's government has launched operations in Basra that make clear a free Iraq will no longer tolerate the lawlessness by Iranian-backed militants.

In the period ahead, we'll also continue to train, equip, and support the Iraqi security forces, continue to transfer security responsibilities to them as provinces become ready, and move over time into an overwatch role. The Iraqi army and police are increasingly capable, and leading the fight to secure their country. As Iraqis assume the primary role in providing security, American forces will increasingly focus on targeted raids against the terrorists and extremists, they will continue training Iraqi forces, and they will be available to help Iraq's security forces if required.

On the economic front, Iraq is moving forward. With Iraq's economy growing, oil revenues on the rise, and its capital investment expanding, our economic role in the country is changing. Iraqis in their recent budget would outspend us on reconstruction by more than ten to one. And American funding for large-scale reconstruction projects is approaching zero. Our share of Iraq's security costs will drop, as well, as Iraqis pay for the vast majority of their own army and police. And that's the way it should be. Ultimately, we expect Iraq to shoulder the full burden of these costs. In the period ahead, Iraq's economy will increasingly move away from American assistance, rely on private investment, and stand on its own.

On the political front, Iraq has seen bottom-up progress -- as tribes and other groups in the provinces who fought terror are now turning to rebuilding local political structures and taking charge of their own affairs. Progress in the provinces is leading to progress in Baghdad, as Iraqi leaders increasingly act together and they share

power, and they forge compromises on behalf of the nation. Upcoming elections will consolidate this progress. They'll provide a way for Iraqis to settle disputes through the political process instead of through violence. Iraqis plan to hold provincial elections later this year, and these elections will be followed by national elections in 2009.

On the diplomatic front, Iraq will increase its engagement in the world -- and the world must increase its engagement with Iraq. To help in this effort, I'm directing Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus to visit Saudi Arabia on their trip back to Iraq. I'm directing our nation's senior diplomats to meet with the leaders in Jordan, the UAE, and Qatar, and Kuwait and Egypt. In each capital, they will brief them on the situation in Iraq, and encourage these nations to reopen their embassies in Baghdad, and increase their overall support for Iraq. This will be followed by Secretary Rice's trip to the third Expanded Neighbors Conference in Kuwait City and the second International Compact with Iraq meeting in Stockholm.

A stable, successful, independent Iraq is in the strategic interests of Arab nations. And all who want peace in the Middle East should support a stable, democratic Iraq. And we will urge all nations to increase their support this year.

The regime in Tehran also has a choice to make. It can live in peace with its neighbor, enjoy strong economic and cultural and religious ties. Or it can continue to arm and train and fund illegal militant groups, which are terrorizing the Iraqi people and turning them against Iran. If Iran makes the right choice, America will encourage a peaceful relationship between Iran and Iraq. If Iran makes the wrong choice, America will act to protect our interests, and our troops, and our Iraqi partners.

On each of these fronts -- security, economic, political, and diplomatic -- Iraqis are stepping forward to assume more responsibility for the welfare of their people and the fate of their country. In all these fronts, America will continue to play an increasingly supporting role.

Our work in Iraq will still demand sacrifices from our whole nation, especially our military, for some time to come. To ease the burden on our troops and their families, I've directed the Secretary of Defense to reduce deployment lengths from 15 months to 12 months for all active Army soldiers deploying to the Central Command area of operations. These changes will be effective for those deploying after August 1st. We'll also ensure that our Army units will have at least a year home for every year in the field. Our nation owes a special thanks to the soldiers and families who've supported this extended deployment. We owe a special thanks to all who serve in the cause of freedom in Iraq.

The stress on our force is real, but the Joint Chiefs have assured me that an all-volunteer force -- our all-volunteer force is strong and resilient enough to fight and win this war on terror. The trends in Iraq are positive. Our troops want to win. Recruiting and retention have remained strong during the surge. And I believe this: I believe the surest way to depress morale and weaken the force would be to lose in Iraq.

One key to ensuring that our military remains ready is to provide the resources they need promptly. Congress will soon consider a vital emergency war funding request. Members of Congress must pass a bill that provides our troops the resources they need -- and does not tie the hands of our commanders or impose artificial timelines for withdrawal. This bill must also be fiscally responsible. It must not exceed the reasonable \$108 billion request I sent to Congress months ago. If the bill meets all these requirements, it will be a strong show of support for our troops. If it doesn't, I'll veto it.

Some in Washington argue that the war costs too much money. There's no doubt that the costs of this war have been high. But during other major conflicts in our history, the relative cost has been even higher. Think about the Cold War. During the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, our defense budget rose as high as 13 percent of our total economy. Even during the Reagan administration, when our economy expanded significantly, the defense budget still accounted for about 6 percent of GDP. Our citizens recognized that the imperative of stopping Soviet expansion justified this expense. Today, we face an enemy that is not only expansionist in its aims, but has actually attacked our homeland -- and intends to do so again. Yet our defense budget accounts for just over 4 percent of our economy -- less than our commitment at any point during the four decades of the Cold War. This is still a large amount of money, but it is modest -- a modest fraction of our nation's wealth -- and it pales when compared to the cost of another terrorist attack on our people.

We should be able to agree that this is a burden worth bearing. And we should be able to agree that our national interest require the success of our mission in Iraq.

Iraq is the convergence point for two of the greatest threats to America in this new century -- al Qaeda and Iran. If we fail there, al Qaeda would claim a propaganda victory of colossal proportions, and they could gain safe havens in Iraq from which to attack the United States, our friends and our allies. Iran would work to fill the vacuum in Iraq, and our failure would embolden its radical leaders and fuel their ambitions to dominate the region. The Taliban in Afghanistan and al Qaeda in Pakistan would grow in confidence and boldness. And violent extremists around the world would draw the same dangerous lesson that they did from our retreats in Somalia and Vietnam. This would diminish our nation's standing in the world, and lead to massive humanitarian casualties, and increase the threat of another terrorist attack on our homeland.

On the other hand, if we succeed in Iraq after all that al Qaeda and Iran have invested there, it would be a historic blow to the global terrorist movement and a severe setback for Iran. It would demonstrate to a watching world that mainstream Arabs reject the ideology of al Qaeda, and mainstream Shia reject the ideology of Iran's radical regime. It would give America a new partner with a growing economy and a democratic political system in which Sunnis and Shia and Kurds all work together for the good of their country. And in all these ways, it would bring us closer to our most important goal -- making the American people safer here at home.

I want to say a word to our troops and civilians in Iraq. You've performed with incredible skill under demanding circumstances. The turnaround you have made possible in Iraq is a brilliant achievement in American history. And while this war is

difficult, it is not endless. And we expect that, as conditions on the ground continue to improve, they will permit us to continue the policy of return on success. The day will come when Iraq is a capable partner of the United States. The day will come when Iraq is a stable democracy that helps fight our common enemies and promote our common interests in the Middle East. And when that day arrives, you'll come home with pride in your success, and the gratitude of your whole nation. God bless you. (Applause.)

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