



MILLER CENTER  
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UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA

Gerald L. Baliles, Director

## Miller Center of Public Affairs -- National Discussion and Debate Series

Resolution: Keeping troops in Iraq is vital for America's national interests in the Middle East

September 18, 2007

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**BALILES:** Good evening and welcome to the historic Rotunda at the University of Virginia. My name is Jerry Baliles, and I'm the director of the Miller Center of Public Affairs.

Tonight we launch our national discussion and debate series on the issues of importance to the governance of this country. With it, we seek to educate and to elevate the level of civility in the public discussion of the complex questions of our time.

The topic this evening: Iraq.

Moderating our inaugural session is Margaret Warner, senior correspondent for *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*.

Welcome, Margaret.

**WARNER:** Thank you, Governor Baliles.

Heading into this election season there is one issue foremost on the minds of voters and of our political and military leaders as they struggle to find a way forward, and that is, of course, Iraq.

We've gathered tonight to debate a proposition that we believe captures the essence of the national debate about Iraq. And that proposition, that resolution, is whether keeping troops in Iraq is vital to America's national interests in the Middle East.

To debate that proposition, we have four of the country's leading experts on Iraq and the wider region.

For the team in favor of the resolution: one of the architects of the current troop surge, Frederick Kagan, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute; and Reuel Marc Gerecht, formerly a Mideast specialist at the CIA, and now also affiliated with the American Enterprise Institute.

And the team opposed to the resolution: former State Department and National Security Council official Jessica Mathews. She's now president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; and former assistant secretary of defense Chas Freeman, who was U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War.

But, before we begin, some background.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

ANNOUNCER (VOICE-OVER): After four years of war, and with Americans becoming increasingly disenchanted, the United States' continued military involvement in Iraq dominates national discourse.

SEN. RUSSELL FEINGOLD: Many American troops have died in a situation that doesn't make sense. I can't believe people have waited this long.

SEN. JOSEPH LIEBERMAN: We cannot allow our nation to be defeated in Iraq by the same Islamist extremists who attacked us on 9/11.

ANNOUNCER (VOICE-OVER): Most Americans agree that the U.S. has major national interests in the Middle East: oil, the fight against anti-American terrorists, the prevention of nuclear proliferation, and the continued effort for Arab-Israeli peace.

The source of disagreement: Is the U.S. military presence in Iraq helping or hurting U.S. national interests?

When President George W. Bush made the decision to go to war in Iraq in March 2003...

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH: The risks of inaction would be far greater.

ANNOUNCER (VOICE-OVER): Iraqi conventional forces were no match for American smart weapons, superior communications, and real-time intelligence.

ANNOUNCER (VOICE-OVER): Within weeks, the regime of Saddam Hussein had collapsed. The Bush administration hoped regime change in Iraq would be the first step in the transformation of the Middle East. Iraq would become a pro-American democracy. Radicalism would be put on the defensive.

But American military might has been unable to provide basic security in the aftermath of the collapse of the Iraqi regime. In 2005, Iraqis went to the polls and elected a new government to great fanfare. But the government, now headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, has failed to provide political stability, and itself seems mired in sectarian divisions and on the verge of collapse.

Meanwhile, Al Qaida has established a growing presence in the country, and the violence has grown as Iraqis have organized along sectarian and ethnic lines.

In early 2006, an attack on a major Shia mosque signaled the onset of a new stage of warfare between Sunnis and Shias.

ANNOUNCER (VOICE-OVER): President Bush also expressed concern that Iraq's neighbor Iran was providing weapons and training to Shiite militants while continuing its own nuclear programs.

By the summer of 2007, American optimism for the region had been replaced by efforts to avoid full-scale civil war in Iraq, contain the sectarian violence and prevent neighboring Sunni-Shia powers with their own interests from interfering in Iraq.

Some cost estimates for the war: \$275 million a day. And if such long-term expenses as amortizing equipment, retraining troops and providing ongoing medical care are added...

(UNKNOWN): The total cost of the war would be between \$1 trillion and \$2 trillion.

ANNOUNCER (VOICE-OVER): A bipartisan Iraq Study Group recommended spring 2008 as a target date for withdrawal of most combat troops and called for active diplomatic engagement in the region.

President Bush rejected the two principal recommendations of the study group but did make changes in his Iraq management team.

ANNOUNCER (VOICE-OVER): Shortly after the 2006 mid-term elections, he brought in a new secretary of defense, Robert Gates, selected a new ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, and named General David Petraeus his new forest-commander.

The president announced that he would send 30,000 more troops to Iraq in what became known as "the surge," to help by time for the beleaguered Iraqi government.

President Bush's new team promised to take an objective look at the U.S. presence in Iraq, which set the stage for their September report. Seven months after the surge began, Petraeus and Crocker testified there has been measured military success, but very little corresponding political progress in Iraq.

Petraeus said troop levels could be reduced to pre-surge strength by next summer, which would leave about 130,000 U.S. troops in Iraq. Petraeus also said any discussion of further reductions was premature.

Since the war began, more than 3,700 American troops and tens of thousands of civilians have been killed in Iraq.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

**WARNER:** In a nationally televised speech after the Petraeus testimony, the president endorsed and embraced the general's recommendation, and announced a modest drawdown in U.S. combat forces beginning this year through late 2008. But he said any further reductions would depend on conditions on the ground.

**WARNER:** Now for our debate. We've adopted a format designed to allow the fullest possible exploration of this complex topic. In the first 20 minutes, each debater will have five minutes to present his or her position, alternating between the two teams. Then we'll go to a segment of a freer, more open discussion among the participants here, with a little prodding from me.

And finally, we'll take questions from the audience here and from our Web site before closing statements.

Again, the resolution: "Keeping troops in Iraq is vital for American national interests in the Middle East.

First up, in support of that, Frederick Kagan.

**KAGAN:** America has a number of vital interests in Iraq, two of which are most germane to this discussion.

One is continuing the defeat of Al Qaida in Iraq which is now underway, which I will discuss; and the other is to prevent Iran from radicalizing the Shia and working to further destabilize the Middle East, which my colleague, Reuel Gerecht will discuss.

There has been controversy about whether Al Qaida in Iraq is related to the larger Al Qaida movement. I think that this controversy is, in fact, unjustified. Al Qaida in Iraq is very clearly tied in to the global Al Qaida movement.

**KAGAN:** Its leaders, who are predominantly foreign, have interacted directly in debates about strategy and tactics with the Al Qaida central leaders now in Pakistan. Al Qaida in Iraq receives significant resources from the global Al Qaida movement, principally foreign fighters, who comprise still about 80 percent of the suicide bombers in Iraq.

And Al Qaida in Iraq has frequently identified its objectives in precisely the same terms as the global Al Qaida movement. And it has used Iraq in the past as a base for attacks against Jordan, and it's indicated its desire to use Iraq as a base for attacks throughout the region.

Its continued existence in Iraq, if it were not checked, would pose a great danger to American interests throughout the region, and ultimately I believe throughout the world, and it is absolutely vital that the United States continue to confront Al Qaida in Iraq, which is something that can only be done not only with troops continuing to be in Iraq, but pursuing something like the strategy that is currently under way.

This has also been a controversial issue.

**KAGAN:** And there are many, many people who explain that they would like to fight Al Qaida globally but that they do not think we should be fighting Al Qaida in Iraq or that we could be fighting Al Qaida in Iraq without the presence of American ground forces conducting counterinsurgency operations.

Neither statement is true. The global Al Qaida movement has also indicated that it regards Iraq as the central front in the war on terror, that it places great stake -- excuse me, in their war on us, I should say -- that it places great stake in success in Iraq, that it would regard a defeat in Iraq as an enormous setback and that it would take advantage of any perceived victory in Iraq.

In Iraq itself, there has been an effort to explain that we should fight terrorism without engaging in sectarian conflict, without being drawn into a civil war.

This is a misunderstanding of the nature of the terrorist problem in Iraq.

It is actually impossible to disaggregate the problem of fighting Al Qaida in Iraq from the sectarian violence which Al Qaida in Iraq deliberately sparked, beginning in 2003 and 2004, working up to the destruction of the Al-Askari Mosque in February 2006; intentionally trying to provoke sectarian strife, which has been an essential component of Al Qaida strategy for embedding itself in the Iraqi population.

**KAGAN:** If we simply were to withdraw and allow the sectarian strife to continue in Iraq unabated, we would be furthering the objectives of the Al Qaida leaders who see that terrorism both to pose as protectors of the Sunni population against Shia death squads, and also as a cover for their own violence against the Sunni.

And this has been one of the things that we've seen most dramatically in the process of beginning a defeat of Al Qaida. It is true that the Sunni population -- that the Sunni leadership in Al Anbar Province expressed a desire to turn against Al Qaida in 2006.

**KAGAN:** It is also true that it was not able to do so until American forces in Al Anbar province were augmented, adopted a new strategy, and you were executing a strategy that was being supported throughout Iraq.

Interestingly, as American forces in Iraq have moved into areas that had been Al Qaida strongholds and asked for the support of the locals against Al Qaida, the first question that they are often asked is, "Are you going to stay this time and protect us?"

If the answer to that question is, "Yes," as it has been recently, then it has been possible for us to gain tremendous support from the local population and protect them as they turn against the terrorists and do in fact become some of our most effective allies in the war on terror.

If the answer to that question becomes, "No, we will abandon you to the not-so-tender mercies of Al Qaida, to their vengeance, to their retribution," then we will find that support for counterterrorism activities in Iraq will dry up and the movements that have led us so far along the path toward defeating Al Qaida in Iraq will stop.

**WARNER:** Thank you.

Now, first up arguing against the resolution, Jessica Mathews.

**MATHEWS:** One of our central problems in dealing with Iraq has been that we see it constantly through the lens of the U.S. war effort, and that induces a tremendous distortion.

If we can look outside that lens and see Iraq in its own terms – in terms of its own history, its own politics, its own culture – that is driving events there, you see a very different picture.

What is happening is a political struggle for power that rushes in to fill a vacuum when a government is overthrown -- in this case, Saddam Hussein.

**MATHEWS:** You have Sunnis who are unwilling to accept their diminished position of -- their diminished political status. You have Kurds who are fighting for autonomy and for control of oil resources.

You have Shia – 60 percent of the country – who are fighting among themselves for power which they've never had before, and – recently – and against the Sunnis in fear that they will – both retribution for past wrongs and in fear that they'll come back.

In this mix, foreign terrorists – Al Qaida in Iraq and other groups – are a very small part; a destructive part, a vicious part, but a very small part. They exploit the chaos, but they are a sideshow to the core struggle.

Now, in a struggle like this, an insurgency against a foreign military power, and in a political struggle for power, there is a universal truth.

**MATHEWS:** And that is that there is no military solution. There is only a political solution. This was true for the French in Algeria. It was true for the Russians in Chechnya. It is true for the Israelis with the Palestinians. It is universally true.



And the people who have said this most clearly and recognize it to be true most unequivocally are our military leadership. They have said it over and over again, most recently Admiral Mullen, the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that military force is important for creating political reconciliation and economic growth, and barring that – and these are his words – no amount of troops and no amount of time will make much of a difference.

The purpose of the surge, the original purpose, was a political one. It was not just to reduce violence for its own sake, but to reduce it so that a political solution could emerge.

**MATHEWS:** The president said this over and over again until mid-summer. By then it had become clear that that political solution was not forth-coming, that indeed political context in Iraq had gotten worse rather than better.

Shia unity had crumbled. The Shia and the Kurds were less willing, rather than more willing, to share power with the Sunnis. The moderate Sunnis who had put their lives at stake to work with the government had walked out. Half the cabinet was gone, and on and on.

The other reason -- the reasons it didn't work were not because of a weak prime minister or a lazy parliament. And they couldn't be corrected by changing that leadership. It didn't work because the groups in Iraq are fighting for their fundamental identities and for their future, for fundamental interests, not pieces of legislation that we've diminished by calling benchmarks.

The other reason it hasn't worked is because of the momentum of violence the -- at least in the short term, irreversible momentum.

**MATHEWS:** Four-and-a-half million Iraqis are either dead from the violence, forced from their homes, or refugees from the country. In U.S. per capita terms, that is 50 million people.

Ask yourself the question: Could we, under those conditions, come together as a country, amend our constitution, bury past wrongs, forgive, forget, redistribute wealth, redistribute power, all of that under foreign military dictate, with 50 million people dead, homeless or out of the country?

To ask the question is to answer it. And yet, we continue to insist that somehow the Iraqis can.

Last week, the president recognized the failure of the surge when he radically redefined it in his speech, where he said, in his words, "The goal of the surge is to provide security and to help prepare Iraqi forces to maintain it." So where we are now is we have military power and no end to direct it toward.

The question tonight asks whether it's vital to keep troops in the country.

**MATHEWS:** But troops are not a strategy. Troops derive from a strategy. What is vital to our national interests is to have an achievable goal and a strategy for reaching it.

To keep on doing the same thing that hasn't worked, not just for six months but for three years, in the hope that somehow it will come out differently, or to do it because we are scared of the consequences of doing something different is to sit in a hole and keep right on digging.

**WARNER:** Now, back to the team supporting the resolution that keeping troops in Iraq is vital to American national interests in the Middle East and to Reuel Marc Gerecht.

**GERECHT:** I always find it a bit odd that, when we talk about reasons why we should leave Iraq and we enumerate the suffering of the Iraqis, and that's a reason to leave, I think, by any calculation, if we leave that country, we're going to see slaughter in that region which we are in part responsible for.

I think it would be a mistake to believe that the Americans are innocent in this process.

**GERECHT:** One of the reasons that things have gotten so bad in Iraq is because we had generals that sounded as if they'd gone to the New School of Social Research and not, in fact, to a military academy. I mean, Gen. John Abizaid kept telling us that we were going to have a light footprint approach in Iraq, that in fact we are not going to put very many troops on the ground and that we're going to allow the Iraqis to come forward.

Well, what the resulted in, in fact, was the slaughter of a good many Iraqis, primarily Shia, and the radicalization of that community. And what we are attempting to do now is, in fact, correct those mistakes.

Now, I think you can do that.

Now, I would also add that the notion that Al Qaida is a sideshow in Iraq just bedevils me. I mean, what Al Qaida has done there – and that includes both foreign and Iraqi elements; let's not make Al Qaida just into a foreign body, it is both. All right? What it has done, it has helped radicalize the Sunni community, it has seriously radicalized the Iraqi Shia community.

**GERECHT:** That has been an enormous factor in the difficulties of trying to reach some type of modus vivendi inside of that country.

Now, I think it is likely we can do that, but we are going to have to take care of Al Qaida. And certainly, the notion that by abandoning that country, that somehow Al Qaida is going to disappear, I think – I do not understand that. If we lose, then I guarantee you, you can already see it in Al Qaida literature, they are talking about victory in Iraq the same way they talked about victory in Afghanistan.

You cannot win these things, you cannot hope to deflate Islamic extremism by losing.

The presence of the United States, though aggravating to many a Muslim fundamentalist, is certainly, I would argue, less of a problem than in fact the United States fleeing the country and allowing that country to go tailspin into massive internecine violence.

Also, what is important to remember, you cannot deal with that country unless you are willing to actually deal with the Iranian threat. Now, what the Iranians are doing inside of Iraq is radicalizing it.

**GERECHT:** Their objective is to recreate the circumstances that gave birth to the Hezbollah in Lebanon. They want -- in fact, the more radical it becomes, the more they can take advantage of it.

And what they're doing inside of the country -- speak very frankly about it -- they're killing American soldiers. They are not killing American soldiers because they want to see stability in the country.

An operating principle of the Iraq Study Group was that, in fact, Iran had become status quo power and that they really wanted to see stability in the country. Wrong.

What they are doing in the country, they have a perfect storm there for them. They are trying, one, to make Americans believe they're trying to kill Americans, they're trying to kill the Iraqi Sunnis, and they're also trying to kill the Iraqi Shia, who by the way did not stand up for them during the Iran-Iraq war.

They are trying to make the circumstances, which we now are looking down south, where they're trying to fuel internecine conflict. If we leave, it is bound to happen.

Now, these are the negatives that are going to happen: that you are going to add jet fuel to Islamic extremism on the Sunni side, that you are going to add jet fuel to the extremism on the Shiite side.

**GERECHT:** But, also, you should have hope. I mean, I disagree very strongly with Jessica. I think the Iraqis have actually done a reasonably decent job in the time that's been allotted to them, given the huge violence that has taken place in that country; much of that violence because, in fact, we chose not to have a counterinsurgency strategy.

We now have one. I mean, General Petraeus is, in fact, attempting to put into place a counterinsurgency strategy that makes sense. It has the potential for checking Al Qaida. It has the potential for protecting the Iraqi Shia community from the radicalizing efforts of the Iranians, to give them space to breathe.

Now, are we going to do this on a timeframe of a year? No. I mean, the real truth of the matter is the Americans are going to be in Iraq for long time. I would argue it's a good thing. It was a good thing that the Americans were in Korea for a long time, it's a good thing that the Americans extended a defense pact to the Taiwanese, it's a good thing.

The possibilities and benefits of the Iraqi society actually writing itself and developing a reasonably decent democratic system are still there.

**GERECHT:** The thing to remember most in Iraq is that the Iraqi Shia community hasn't backed down from the democratic promise. You cannot find the Iraqi – even the extremists arguing that they need to have a clerical dictatorship, they need to have some type of Shiite strongman. They are still pledging themselves to the possibilities of democracy, and we really shouldn't give up.

**WARNER:** Thank you.

And our final team response against the resolution, Chas Freeman.

**FREEMAN:** The way to think about Iraq is that it is militarily occupied by the United States and politically occupied by Iran. Our arrival and the destruction of the Iraqi state, which we brought about, created the opportunity for Iran to move in.

And it also created the opportunity for Al Qaida to extend its reach into Iraq. There was no Al Qaida in Iraq prior to our challenge to Iraqi nationalism which gave it the opportunity to form a parasitical relationship on resistance to us.

**FREEMAN:** There is also resistance to Iran. The default position in Iraqi politics throughout history has been suspicion of Iran and resistance to Iranian influence.

But where we are now, let us remind ourselves -- actually, I was feeling quite relieved when I heard you speak, because I'd begun to wonder whether the only reason we were hanging around in Iraq was so that the people who sent us there wouldn't have to say they were sorry. And now I understand that we're hanging around there and shooting the place up in the hope that something positive will turn out and happen. But I don't see it happening.

**FREEMAN:** Fifty-seven percent of the Iraqis believe it is legitimate to kill Americans. Seventy-nine percent of Iraqis want Americans to leave their country. That includes 98 percent of Sunnis, who are now our allies against Al Qaida. It includes 84 percent of Shiites.

So I would argue the best way to achieve our objectives in Iraq, which I agree, should be strategic denial of Iraq to Al Qaida, a reduction of Iranian influence to something resembling what it was before we went in there and gave them the opening we did, and I would argue, avoiding a wider war between Iraqi factions and Iraq's neighbors, as well as reconstituting our military, which is now tied down. Our Army and our Marines are completely tied down in Iraq. We have no ability to respond to emergencies elsewhere.

**FREEMAN:** And, indeed, we are involved in a war of attrition that is grinding up our troops and our equipment.

And, finally, I think we have to take account of the fact that this war has taken a huge toll on American prestige and leadership internationally.

When we call, no one answers anymore. The costs of this adventure go well beyond the Middle East.

Can we deny Iraq to Al Qaida and other terrorists of global reach by leaving?

You bet. The Sunni tribes, the conservative Muslims who have turned against Al Qaida, and whom we are very intelligently helping, will, if we give them the help they need, finish the job.

Al Qaida is mainly a foreign element, and it is foreign ideologically, as well as in terms of its personnel.

**FREEMAN:** Yes, it is connected to Al Qaida elsewhere. But the biggest defeat to Al Qaida would be depriving it of the recruitment poster that we have painted for it in Iraq.

Similarly, if we leave Iraq, Iraqi nationalism will, once again, be able to focus on Iran and not on us as a foreign military occupying force. And if we leave Iraq, we will be able to rebuild our military and regain our prestige and leadership internationally.

There is no reason that leaving Iraq means leaving the region. It is entirely possible to use diplomacy and contact with neighboring countries as we leave to shape the environment so that it supports the purposes I've outlined.

The best way to serve those purposes is to leave, and the biggest losers from our leaving would not be us. We would gain. It would be Al Qaida and Iran and our other adversaries internationally who are moving into the vacuums we are creating by total focus on this one very important part of the world.

**FREEMAN:** So I say we should leave. We should tell our military to develop a plan for orderly withdrawal of troops and equipment that consolidates the gains we've made against Al Qaida but that gets us out and leaves us elsewhere in the region; able to re-intervene if somehow Al Qaida reestablishes itself, but out.

**WARNER:** Now for our more free-form exchange among our panelists and to cover more ground. Ideally, one from each team will respond to a given question.

I've encouraged our debaters to jump in if they feel they absolutely must say something. And I will jump in to keep the discussion on track and try to keep the time fairly equal.

I'd like to begin this round, though, with the team that went second in the first round, so this will be the team to my left.

And let's talk a little more about Iran. There seems to be agreement that the U.S. and Iran are fighting a proxy war in Iraq.

My question is: Where will this lead? Is this a precursor to direct military conflict with Iran, and is there a way to shape the Iraq engagement that will make that either more or less likely?

Who would like to respond?

**MATHEWS:** Well, these are separate, although now entwined, issues. There is nothing predetermined about a particular outcome for either staying or leaving, with respect to Iran.

There is no question but that our invasion of Iraq empowered enormously Iran, because Iraq was the only counter-power in the region. That's why, in the past, U.S. policy toward Iran and Iraq were called dual containment, because the two balanced each other.

We removed that. There is no way we can undo the fact, whether we stay or leave, that Iran is now a much stronger and more dangerous power.

**MATHEWS:** On the other hand, I would I think Chas made a critical point in saying that our presence in Iraq emboldens and empowers Iran, and our leaving it in that sense is a defeat for Iran, not a gain.

**WARNER:** Response?

**GERECHT:** Yes, I find that amusing. If you look at Iranian commentary, I don't think they would look at it as if the Americans fleeing, it would be a defeat. I think they'd look at it as a victory.

I mean, the Americans had been constantly hoping for almost 20 years now that somehow, the Iranian regime would transform itself into a status quo power that would work with this and would be nice and all the rest. But what we have seen, in fact, in the Islamic republic is that it's gone in the opposite direction. They've actually become more hardcore.

**GERECHT:** Ahmadinejad is perhaps the perfect example of that, but I would just stress to you that he's basically in sync with Ali Khamenei, the leader of the country, which is why his position keeps going up and not down. And what you have to deal with the Iranians is they are hard charging toward a nuclear weapon. All right? That is their ultimate goal.



What they are going to do is use that nuclear weapons in conjunction with a much stronger position in Iraq. What they're going to try to do in Iraq is something that failed the first time around with Khomeini, and that is, they're trying to get a Shiite base of support; they're trying to build a radical group.

Now, the way they do that is by causing problems in that country by in fact increasing the turmoil. They are not going to run from Iraq. They're going to stay. They're going to fight it out. And if they're successful with nuclear weaponry, they'll use that behind them as leverage.

**WARNER:** All right. Political benchmarks and when do we get out – Jessica Mathews said that she thought these benchmarks were – you didn't use the word "absurd," but essentially unrealistic, and made the comparison to what a huge problem it would be here in the United States if we'd had to deal with problems like that after the carnage.

So, to this team, what are – if the – one, do you agree that they're unrealistic? If so, then what are the measures that the American public and our own leaders can look to that tells us that it's safe or wise to leave?

**KAGAN:** There has been a lot of confusion about the benchmarks, their importance, what we want, why they matter, whether they matter. The purpose behind talking about legislative benchmarks was to help the, encourage the Iraqis to move toward some sort of political reconciliation. That was the whole point.

The interesting thing is that the Iraqis have been moving toward political reconciliation on the ground. They have de facto amnesties that are taking place as more than 30,000 insurgents have been brought in and the government has accepted their coming into the Iraqi security forces.

**KAGAN:** Oil revenues are being shared. When \$100 million goes to Anbar province in reconstruction, where do we think that money comes from?

Iraq has only one source of income. Oil revenues are being distributed.

De-Baathification has also been under way on the ground, with former Baathist army officers invited to return to the force or gain pensions and so forth.

We have been making progress – they have been making progress politically, not in parliament.

So what we have to decide – one of the things we have to decide, as we discuss this: Is the issue the process, that they do this exactly the way that we said, that they said a year ago that this was how they were going to do it?

Or is what matters that they are actually doing it, that it is actually making progress, that the violence is actually going down, and that we're actually seeing signs of reconciliation on the ground?

I would submit that it's the second point that's more important.

**FREEMAN:** Signs of reconciliation on the ground are pretty hard to see on the ground. You know, 72 percent of Iraqis think that the U.S. military presence has made their lives more difficult.

Seventy percent believe the surge has made things worse, not better. And I repeat, 79 percent of Iraqis want us out.

Reconciliation. We are allied with Sunni tribesmen in Anbar now whose principal enemy after Al Qaida is the Shiite government in Baghdad. They're very open in saying that they're training with us to go after that government.

A series of tactical successes, welcome as they are, does not constitute a strategy. Moving troops around, leaving them in Iraq is not a strategy.

Question is what's all this for. What is the connection between the military actions and the political results that we need to achieve to feel that we have achieved anything in Iraq.

**MATHEWS:** Can I...

**FREEMAN:** Yes.

**MATHEWS:** ... just add something to Chas' point? We convinced ourselves with the fiction that there was something in Iraq called a "national unity government." It was never a unity government.

We sold a constitution to the Iraqi people on the promise that it would be amended to give the Sunnis more power. We couldn't deliver on that promise.

We already have, under this constitution, a terribly weak federal government -- central government. If we make it weaker, it will get worse. So small progress in the regions is going to lead to a further faction -- further centrifugal forces in the country, rather than bringing it together. So it's kind of the opposite of what you want to see.

**GERECHT:** Quickly, two things. I mean, in the Middle East, I mean, out in the West -- I don't know, I don't trust polling -- but the notion that you can take polling in Iraq, a society pulverized by a totalitarian regime, suddenly go in there and you know, total strangers -- you come in and say, "What do you believe?"

I mean, I guarantee you that if Chas and I went to the Shia regions, which represent 60 to 65 percent of the population and you ask them, "Do you want the Americans out?," yes, sure, everybody would say yes.

And then if you say, "Well, would you want them out no?," they'd say, "Uuggghh."

I mean, the best parallel to this is if you looked at those figures and you took them on face value, you'd assume that we'd have a replication of 1920 and the great jihad against the Americans -- against the British led by the Shia.

You don't have that. You don't have anything near that.

There is a general consensus on the Iraqi Shiite and Kurdish side, which represents, let's be -- you know, 80 to 85 percent of the population, that in fact the Americans are a good thing. And I think you're beginning to see, as Fred said, a change of that view on the Sunni side, that they realized there are worse things than Americans -- they've seen it when the Shiites got even

– that they want to see progress, and the Americans are becoming in fact indispensable to that progress on the ground.

**WARNER:** I want to move this along to even a more long-range look, and it's something that Chas Freeman raised, and this has to do with U.S. military resources. And so I'll ask this team to go first.

What would keeping 125,000 to 135,000 troops in Iraq after late 2008, which seems clearly in the president's vision anyway, do to the U.S. ability to deal with other military challenges around the world? And to what degree should that consideration be driving U.S. decisions about maintaining troops?

**KAGAN:** If you believe, as I do, that the United States has vital national interests in Iraq and that a defeat in Iraq would place our national security in jeopardy, then the priority when you are fighting a war is winning the war that you are fighting and not maintaining the resources to deal with possible contingencies that might or might not arise.

There's no question but that you pay an opportunity cost when you are fighting a war, and you pay it -- of course, a tragic cost in lives and a cost in treasure. There's no question about that.

If our focus is on keeping our military ready for any possible contingencies, then we will never fight any war. That's how you do that. Any time you fight a war, you have a problem.

**KAGAN:** The issue should not be about maintaining the abstract readiness of the American military to deal with some contingencies that might or might not arise.

The issue is: Do you think that America has interests in Iraq that need to be preserved? If you do, do you think that they require the deployment of American forces to succeed?

I believe the answer to both of those questions are yes. If you think that the answer is no, then you should support, you know, some other strategy, and that's fine. But the issue of preserving American military power in the abstract is also not a strategy.

**WARNER:** Now, Chas Freeman, you think the answer is no. And my question to you is, so what are the likely challenges that you see on the horizon that the U.S. would have a difficult time dealing with militarily if we were to maintain this force posture in Iraq for the next 18 months to two years?

**FREEMAN:** One can look at contingencies in Korea, to which we remain deeply committed. One could look at other contingencies in East Asia, involving Taiwan, which, in fact, is moving toward some sort of crisis point at the moment.

But the issue is not whether we have vital interests in Iraq. Of course we have vital interests in Iraq. But we have vital interests elsewhere.

And we are totally neglecting a whole series of issues around the world, as a result of our single-minded focus on this.

I'd like to go back, just, if I may, for one moment, to say that one of the reasons that the Sunnis, Arab tribesmen, have been cooperating with us, have decided that we're enemy number two instead of enemy number one, or maybe even enemy number three, is that they think we're leaving.

They understand what the polls and the elections here say. And so they can afford to cooperate with us. If we want to hang around, we're going to see them turn on us again.

And we're going to see Al Qaida which is on the run come back.

**WARNER:** This may be the final question in this round. And I want to now raise something that President Bush raised, which had to do with the long-term U.S. presence in Iraq.

And he said that in his view the U.S. would be engaged in Iraq economically, politically and security-wise for a considerable length of time, certainly past his presidency.

Bob Gates, the defense secretary, has spoken of a long and enduring presence in Iraq.

My question is: Is that an American interest? And what is your vision for what the U.S. role in Iraq would be, say, five years out?

This team.

**GERECHT:** I mean, it's very difficult to pick a timeframe. I've often quipped – I mean, we're going to be there for 10 years or more. I mean, I think that's a good thing.

**WARNER:** But doing what?

**GERECHT:** That the United States -- I mean, the same type of role that it had elsewhere, for example, in Korea.

I mean, American forces are, in fact, a stabilizing factor – that the view that was propounded by General John Abizaid that in fact we were an antibody, I think, is, in fact, the opposite of the truth.

We actually have had a test case of this down in the south with the British, where their weak presence has become ever more feeble and, in fact, has lead to greater and greater violence.

What the American role in Iraq is, one of the important roles, is to go there to be able to, in fact, stabilize the area. Only we can wage a counter-insurgency right now.

The Iraqis can help, we can train them, bring them up to speed, but it's going to take a long time. If we leave -- I disagree with Chas here -- what you're going to see is you're going to see a re-radicalization on the Iraqi Sunni side and the Shiite side.

You'll see them go at each other in a way that just will dwarf what we've seen up until now.

**WARNER:** A fairly brief response, here, because we want to keep getting to the questions.

**FREEMAN:** Very quickly, if I may respond on this. We're in Germany, Japan and Korea; we've been there for 60 years, at their invitation, to defend them against external aggression – not to fight civil wars for them not to suppress resistance to our presence.

This is totally different. If you're sitting in Iraq against the wishes of all the Iraqi people and dreaming about maintaining bases there, you're thinking about something that is both pernicious and preposterous. It isn't going to happen.

**WARNER:** All right. Now it's time – sorry – but for our final round, and we're going to broaden our circle now with questions submitted by members of the audience and also on the Miller Center Web site. Reading the questions will be two University of Virginia students, both seniors: Sarah Myers and Courtney Lindsay.

Sarah, what's our first question?

**MYERS:** The first question was submitted by a member of the audience.

Can Iraq be stabilized as long as the United States and Iran are on the brink of war?

**WARNER:** And who wants to take that first?

Jessica Mathews?

**MATHEWS:** Well, I think the question – I hope we're not on the brink of war with Iran.

That's a separate choice, and so I think the question kind of conflates two different issues.

Here's the truth, though: No failing state – and Iraq is one – can be stabilized without the collaborative involvement of the neighbors.

There is no way – no way – to get to success in Iraq unless the U.S. chooses to involve not just the neighbors we like, but the two we don't, who are the two most important – Syria and Iran – and that is one of the big reasons that the current involvement, if the administration refuses to do that, is failing and will fail unless we can turn it around.

**WARNER:** Fred Kagan?

**KAGAN:** There is this mythology out there that if only we would talk to the Iranians more, they would somehow be helpful, and I don't understand what the factual basis for that is. The interesting thing – and Ryan Crocker has been explicit about this – we have been meeting with the Iranians. He has been meeting with them. We've set up working groups with them.

And, interestingly, he's been able to report that, after every meeting, Iranian support for fighters in Iraq who are killing American soldiers increases.

So I'm very curious to understand what the factual basis is for the assertion. Because this is a critical point. We are being asked to take a strategy on spec here.

And the strategy is, if only we will leave and engage Iran diplomatically, then we will be able to pursue our interests in Iraq in that way.

The burden of proof is on those who advocate that strategy to say, this is why we should imagine that Iran will in fact, could in fact be helpful; this is why we should imagine that it will in fact be possible to deal with Iraq's problems with Iran's cooperation.

Until you can actually make that case with some evidentiary basis, I don't think that you have proposed a sound strategy.

**MATHEWS:** Well, the burden of proof is actually on the opposite side, because we do have a mass of evidence that we can't do it by threatening Iran and attempt to get their collaboration inside.

It is a completely different thing to have a low-level meeting in quiet when the president of the United States is threatening.

Obviously, Iran is not going to cooperate. And it will not be in their interest to cooperate unless we say we're leaving.



**GERECHT:** I would just say, I'm befuddled by the notion that appeasement is going to work with a clerical regime, because that's essentially what we're talking about here, that we're going to achieve some bribe that they are going to say, "All right, that's sufficient. I'm no longer going to train the radical elements of the Mahdi Army. I'm no longer to send in weaponry that's killing Americans every day."

In 2003, they weren't doing that. In 2003, they were quaking before the Americans because they thought, "Oh, we have Americans in Iraq, we have the Americans in Afghanistan. In fact, they look so powerful, let's leave them alone."

Now, things have reversed. They've reversed in part because of our own mistakes. But the Iranians have realized they gain ground through violence.

They haven't gained grounds from being at peace. They haven't gained ground -- they have, in fact, encircled the traditional clergy inside of Iraq. I mean, that is going to continue. They are going to tear up the center if we in fact say, "Well, have it."

I mean, you have to imagine something that we can give them that's going to make them say, "Oh, the progress they've already made through violence, I can double it."

**WARNER:** Courtney Lindsay, our next question?

**LINDSAY:** This is a question submitted by a student: Is a stable Iraq necessarily a pro-American Iraq?

**MATHEWS:** Of course not. In fact, almost surely not.

**GERECHT:** I mean, I think this notion of pro-Americanism in the Middle East is a bit overdone. I mean, Egypt under Mubarak is a pro-American country, supposedly, the government. Yet it is also – Egypt down below is one of the most virulently anti-American societies.

I think you have to be very, very careful how you define that.

What is important in Iraq is that they develop a political system that is responsive to the Iraqis, or at least a vast majority of the Iraqis. If they can develop that type of system, whether they have anti-American rhetoric on many issues, I think, is irrelevant.

The issue is, can they develop a government, can we help them develop a government that, in fact, veers them away from their tyrannical past? I think we can.

**WARNER:** Chas Freeman, do you want to weigh in on this?

**FREEMAN:** I'd say two things. First, the notion that talking to someone you don't agree with is appeasement is absurd. If you don't talk to the people you disagree with, you're doing the diplomatic equivalent of unilateral disarmament.

And if you enter a discussion with the view that you're defeated before you begin, then you probably are defeated. So I think the question is, what's the context here with Iran?

As far as Iraq is concerned, Iraq should be pro-Iraqi, not pro-American. If it is pro-Iraqi, if it follows its own interests, it will not allow Al Qaida to operate. It will not allow Iran to dominate its politics. It will, once again, resume the balancing role that it traditionally had.

**KAGAN:** I agree with you entirely. But the question of talking to the Iranians depends on context. If we surrender Iraq to them and say we're going to leave and you may do what ever you wish, then I have no doubt that the Iranians will be very pleased with that and the diplomatic discussions that ensue will be very fruitful from the standpoint of getting us to agree that they will, in fact, dominate Iraq.

I don't think that...

**FREEMAN:** I haven't heard anybody suggest that.

**KAGAN:** And I haven't suggested that we shouldn't talk to the Iranians. I'm happy to talk to the Iranians. The question is, what – as I understand it, what you are proposing, is that we couple talking with the Iranians to pulling out as rapidly as possible.

And what I'm suggesting to you is that that may be successful from the standpoint of producing effective diplomacy. But I am not at all convinced that it will be successful from the standpoint of accomplishing our interests in Iraq.

And one last point on the question of the alignment of Iraq. There is the question of pro-American or not pro-American, but there is a simple question with a simple answer.

Who is the best ally that the United States of America has in the war against Al Qaida, measured by the casualties that they have taken fighting against Al Qaida? And the answer is, unequivocally, Iraq. And the Iraqis security forces have been fighting against Al Qaida, and the Iraqi government has been fighting against Al Qaida, and now local Sunni, with our assistance, are fighting against Al Qaida.

We can talk about whether they like Coca-Cola or whether they like Pepsi or whether they like George Bush, but the issue at hand here from the standpoint of American national interests is are they or are they not an ally in the war on terror? The government that is there now certainly is. The people that are there now certainly are. And they deserve our support, because they have been supporting our objectives.

**WARNER:** We are going to have to leave that round there. Thank you, Sarah and Courtney, so much. I'm sorry we didn't get to more questions. We had a lot of spirited engagement.

**WARNER:** So now it is time for closing statements from each team. And we'll begin speaking for the resolution.

Reuel Gerecht?

I kept this a surprise until the very end.

(LAUGHTER)

**GERECHT:** I mean, I think it's worthwhile having a little bit of a history lesson, and go back in time to the 1990s. I think, throughout the 1990s, there was a general disposition, under the first Bush administration and also the Clinton administration, to downplay Islamic extremism.

We largely ignored the growth of bin Laden and bin Ladenism in the Middle East. We downplayed – in fact, we replied or didn't reply to terrorist attacks.

On the Iranian side, we, in fact, bent over backwards to the Iranians, hoping that they would come out and talk with us, hoping that, in fact, we could have some type of relationship.

After the bombing of the Khobar Towers, which the Iranians were responsible for, we ignored it and said pretty, pretty please, come and talk with us; pretty, pretty please, we're willing to deal.

Guess what? It didn't happen. Now, what we are essentially talking about here is, do you believe that these threats are real?

There is a growing tendency in the United States to believe that, in fact, Islamic extremism is somehow abstract, that we can move away from it, that -- in fact, withdrawing from Iraq, which is a defeat.

And no matter how you play that, you cannot turn this defeat into a victory.

I mean, I just find it unbelievable that you can walk away there. And I can guarantee you that as soon as the Americans walk, you will have Shiite militants and Sunni militants standing upon the podium saying, "They have been defeated."

If you think that we're going to be in a better position in Afghanistan, that the Pakistanis, that our NATO allies, that the Central Asians are going to look upon an American withdrawal – a rapid American withdrawal, because that's what we're talking about here – and they're going to look upon that as a victory, I suggest to you, no, it's going to go the other way.

We have to take these threats seriously. If we leave you are going to add jet fuel to Islamic extremism on both the Sunni and the Shiite side. They have always premised their attacks upon us by saying we do not have it within us to stand the ground and stay. I suggest to you, we should.

**WARNER:** Thank you, Reuel Gerecht.

And now our final closing statement from the team opposing the resolution, Chas Freeman.

**FREEMAN:** Iraq now stands as a monument to the discipline and the professionalism of our military and the utter ineptitude of our civilian leadership.

If we know -- if we continue in Iraq along the way we are, we know exactly what's going to happen. There will continue to be 80,000 Iraqis ethnically cleansed and moved out of their homes each month. There will continue to be thousands of dead Iraqis and hundreds of dead Americans. We will continue to forfeit our leadership internationally and to neglect problems elsewhere in the world.

If we stay in Iraq, as was the case in Saudi Arabia where the Al Qaida problem originated, we will create the irritations that feed terrorism and multiply our enemies many-fold.

If we do not talk to the Iranians except in the manner we have, which basically is a five-part message, "One, you're evil. Second, we won't talk to you until you give up and surrender and accept our terms. Number three, we intend to overthrow your regime regardless of what you do. And, number four, if you don't cooperate with this diplomatic course I've just outlined, we're very likely to bomb you. And if you try to develop a deterrent against our bombing, we will certainly bomb you," then we will get nowhere.

If we leave Iraq under circumstances in which we play on and use the fears of every country around Iraq -- including Iran, including Syria, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan -- that they might be dragged into a broader war, that they might be implicated in the anarchy and turmoil in Iraq, then we have a basis for doing a regional deal that allows us to withdraw with honor.

And the biggest losers from our withdrawal will be Al Qaida, its recruitment efforts and Iran.

**WARNER:** Thank you, Ambassador Freeman.

That will be the final word.

On the behalf of the Miller Center and the University of Virginia, I want to thank our four panelists for a fascinating discussion and debate that I really think got at and did justice to the complexity of the issue that faced them and the nation over Iraq.

The next Miller Center debate focusing on a key issue that faces the country in this election season will be November 13th in Washington, D.C.

The topic: Privacy rights in an age of terror and technology. Join us for that on the Miller Center Web site and on your local PBS station.

For Governor Jerry Baliles and the Miller Center and the University of Virginia and all of us here in Charlottesville, thank you and good night.

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