

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1353  
February 9, 2007

## The Senate's Iraq Irresolution

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The compromise resolution on the war in Iraq negotiated by Senator John Warner and Senator Carl Levin (S. Con. Res. 7) is not a sign of resolve but of disarray, disunity, and political posturing. The resolution is designed to attract support for its criticism of the Bush Administration's "New Way Forward" in Iraq without requiring the Senate to actually take responsibility for outlining a serious alternative policy for resolving the very difficult situation there. In part, this is because the Senate is too divided to agree on a common policy beyond lowest-common-denominator criticism. Unfortunately, the Warner-Levin resolution is likely to accomplish little except to send a dangerous signal of foreign policy drift and weakness that will discourage America's friends, encourage its adversaries, and undermine Iraqi efforts to build a broad-based government capable of defending the Iraqi people from insurgents and sectarian militias.

**The Resolution.** The resolution states that "the Senate disagrees with the 'plan' to augment our forces by 21,500" but agrees with the Bush Administration that "a failed state in Iraq would present a threat to regional and world peace and the long-term security interests of the United States are best served by an Iraq that can sustain, govern, and defend itself, and serve as an ally in the war against extremists." While it pays lip service to these goals, the resolution is extremely vague about how they are to be achieved without a surge of American troops.

The resolution states that "the primary objective of the overall U.S. strategy in Iraq should be to encourage Iraqi leaders to make political compromises that will foster reconciliation and strengthen the unity government, ultimately leading to improvements in the security situation." But by criticizing U.S. efforts to help Iraqis bolster their own security, the Warner-Levin resolution actually deals a dangerous setback to this professed goal.

**Undermining U.S. Efforts.** The resolution undermines the Administration's efforts to use a surge strategy to enhance the security of Baghdad, the center of gravity of the war in Iraq. Baghdad is the epicenter of sectarian killing, which has eclipsed the insurgency as the chief source of instability. Eighty percent of Iraq's sectarian violence occurs within 30 miles of the capital.

The Administration's plan is based on a surge of U.S. troops, and equally important, a change of strategy that emphasizes the protection of Iraqi civilians, to tamp down insurgent attacks and reduce the spiraling sectarian killing that the insurgent attacks have provoked. This is intended to provide political breathing space for Iraq's embryonic government to take political risks and reach out to

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/MiddleEast/wm1353.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/MiddleEast/wm1353.cfm)

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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moderate Sunnis and wean them from the Sunni-dominated insurgency.

Without a significant improvement in security around Baghdad, Iraqis are likely to react in ways that seriously undermine the prospects for national reconciliation. Rather than put their trust in a government backed by declining U.S. support, many Iraqis would be increasingly motivated to fall back on loyalties to their clan, tribe, or sect. This would greatly increase the chances of Iraq sliding into a full-blown sectarian war, which would unleash much greater bloodshed, a tidal wave of refugees, and a much greater humanitarian catastrophe.

Prime Minister Maliki, increasingly uncertain about the dependability of his U.S. ally, would be more likely to refrain from taking political risks to reach out to moderate Sunni leaders, for fear of undermining his Shia base of support. Other Iraqi officials could hedge their bets and take out insurance policies by cozying up to sectarian militias.

Moderate Sunni leaders would be less likely to turn decisively against the insurgency and cooperate in defeating the Baathist remnants of Saddam's regime, Islamists, and criminal networks that make up the splintered insurgency.

**Conclusion.** President Bush's "New Way Forward" in Iraq is worth a try. While Bush's new strategy cannot guarantee success, it can give Iraqis a fighting chance of attaining a free Iraq. The policy advocated by many of the Warner–Levin resolution's supporters, a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, would only guarantee defeat. Such an abdication of the important stabilizing role that U.S. troops play in Iraq would swiftly lead to a strategic, moral, and humanitarian disaster that would set back the war against terrorism and efforts to contain Iran for decades to come.

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