

Senator Harry Reid
On the Formation of a Government in Iraq
May 22, 2006

Mr. President, I just finished a meeting in my office that was emotional to say the least. Two mothers, both mothers of Marine Corps men, came to my office to tell me about their boys who were killed in Iraq. Aleana Lukac, Hungarian ancestry, beautiful woman, spoke with an accent, told me about her boy. He had better than a 4.0 grade point average at Durango high school. He loved math and science, wanted to be an F.B.I. agent or a C.I.A. operative. Told his mom, "I'm not sure I can do that because we came from a communist country. I'm not sure they would let me do that." He joined the Marine Corps when he was 18 and at 19 years old he was killed.

Gloria Salazar's son was 23 when he was killed. He wanted to be in the Marine Corps from the time he was a little boy. The first attempt he couldn't pass the physical. But he worked on what the deficiencies were and came back and joined the Marine Corps. She was very proud of him. She showed me a picture of his arriving in Iraq. He had his camera that he used that was part of his job in Iraq, and a gun.

The mothers told the same story. They knew when their son had been killed. They knew when their son had been killed. Mrs. Salazar was shopping in a mall and that afternoon her son's picture kept falling out of her purse. She was so troubled she went home and during the day went so sleep, which was unusual, and as the time was assessed thereafter, she slept from the time he was injured to the time he died. The same thing happened to Mrs. Lukac. She was at work and she described her feeling as being a nut with nothing inside it. She just felt so empty. So I expressed to them my sorrow and sympathy and expressed appreciation of a grateful nation for these two young men having given their lives.

For me, it was a very emotional thing, a emotional experience. To hear the mothers talk about private first class John Lukac, killed in al Anbar province, and Corporal William Salazar, Karbala, Iraq.

Like most Americans, I welcomed the news over the weekend that the Iraqi political leaders had created parts of a new government. That's a certainly useful step toward the kind of Iraq we all want to see.

Like most all Americans, I hope this new government will be able to bring security and order to a country wracked by extreme strife. We know more work needs to be done with fashioning a secure and stable Iraq. Three of the most important security ministers are still unnamed. That's hard to comprehend, Mr. President. We've been waiting and waiting for this. There is a cabinet formed, but is it really a cabinet?

And as unbelievable as it may seem to many, there's even talk of disgraced Ahmed Chalabi filling one of those posts. That's what the news accounts are.

I wonder how much longer this administration will insist that the burden of securing Iraq continue to fall squarely on the backs of our heroic U.S. troops –troops like John Lukac and William Salazar?, Secretary Rumsfeld was asked the question in the Senate hearings last week – it turned out to be a question he couldn't answer. And when this past weekend she was asked about the possible redeployment of U.S forces in Iraq coming home, going someplace else, Secretary Rice said that it depends on the outcome of discussions with the Iraqi government. Apparently, Secretary Rice believes Iraqi leaders should decide the fate of our troops.

We're almost at the midpoint of 2006, the year of bipartisan support in Congress saying this must be a year of significant transition. That's the law of the land. That passed on a bipartisan vote during the Defense Authorization bill. An amendment was offered and passed on a bipartisan basis significant that the year 2006 must be a year of significant transition in Iraq with Iraqis assuming responsibility for governing and securing their own country. Unfortunately, there appears to be little evidence of this transition. In fact, we learned on Friday that there will be an increase in U.S. troops to deal with the recent surge in violence. But none of us should be surprised that this administration in this instance isn't following the law. It hasn't on many other occasions.

April was the deadliest month of the year for coalition troops. At the current rate, if violence is sustained, May will surpass April. The situation is similar for Iraq's security personnel. More Iraqi military and police were killed in April than at any time in the preceding six months.

Economically, the trends are no better. Oil production dropped to less than 400,000 barrels per day below pre-war levels. Available electricity in Baghdad has dropped from 16 hours a day prior to the war to its current average of four hours a day. Clean water is below pre-war levels, and because of mismanagement and violence, only 49 of the 136 U.S.-funded projects in the water sector will be completed. The rest have been abandoned. All of these factors reduce Iraq's support for our activities there and fuel anti-American sentiments and insurgent activity.

So, while we all should welcome this partially formed new government, we recall other political milestones that were achieved and quickly swallowed by more violence. For example, since the December election, more than 325 coalition troops have been killed.

In order to ensure that this milestone produces a different and more lasting result, Iraqis - - working with the Bush Administration - - must address outstanding issues surrounding their Constitution. They must form a police force, and diffuse the sectarian conflicts which have left their country on the brink of civil war.

And let's not forget – while the President and his team have chosen to focus the nation's attention on Iraq - we see resurgent Taliban activity in Afghanistan... Iran and North Korea thumbing their noses at the international community... and a surge in terror attacks across the globe. In addition, the mastermind of the deadly attacks on this nation - -

Osama bin Laden - remains at large, while his al Qaeda network has morphed into a global franchise operation.

Great challenges require strong leadership. Today's speech by the president was yet another missed opportunity to provide that leadership.

We heard little about his plan to engage Iraq's neighbors in finding a regional solution to Iraq's problems.

We heard little about his diplomatic efforts to end the sectarian strife.

We heard little about his thoughts on how to put Iraq's reconstruction back on track.

And we heard little about what he's doing to counter the extreme ideology that has made such dangerous inroads into Iraq and around the world.

Instead of kicking the can down the road and letting future Presidents find our way out of Iraq, as we have been told by Secretary Rice will happen and the President himself, it's time for the President to lay out the comprehensive strategy that our troops, our families, and American People have been waiting -- waiting for a long time.

The nation should no longer have to guess what's on the President's mind, and grapple for some insight into what a "conditions based" withdrawal actually means -- a phrase the Defense Secretary apparently doesn't even understand. It's time for the Iraqi people to take control of their own country, their own affairs and long past time that this administration should come up with a plan that places the burden of securing Iraq's forces on Iraq itself. The burden of securing Iraq should be on Iraqis, not the United States. We've done a lot. So, even though the news over the weekend created parts of a new government is a step forward, we still have a long ways to go.