

Ending the Occupation

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Op/Ed

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By Marjorie Cohn

In a bombshell that reverberated throughout the country, Congressman John Murtha called Thursday for an immediate withdrawal of our troops from Iraq. "The US cannot accomplish anything further in Iraq militarily," Murtha said. "It is time to bring [the troops] home ... They have become the enemy."

Murtha, a decorated and highly-respected veteran of the Vietnam War, said he has been visiting our wounded troops at Bethesda and Walter Reed hospitals almost every week since Bush invaded Iraq.

Rep. Murtha probably saw "soldiers with faces slashed by bombs and stitched up by doctors, soldiers with legs terribly mangled, soldiers with no legs - amputees with short stumps, with long stumps, without any stumps since entire limbs are missing," as fellow veteran Stewart Nusbaumer reported seeing at Walter Reed in his article in Intervention Magazine last month.

At times choking back tears, Murtha said, "I have visited with the severely wounded of this war. They are suffering."

The 73-year-old former Marine colonel, who earned two Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star with a Combat "V" and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, knows of what he speaks. It was Murtha to whom Dick Cheney turned for advice years ago. In the 2004 vice-presidential debate, Cheney, who didn't fight in Vietnam because he had "other priorities," noted that Murtha was "one of my strongest allies in Congress when I was Secretary of Defense [in the Bush I administration]." When Cheney was first tapped for the job, he told Murtha, "I'm going to need a lot of help. I don't know a blankety-blank thing about defense."

Cheney's respect for the war hero evaporated, however, after Murtha's explosive remarks last week. "The President and I cannot prevent certain politicians from losing their memory, or their backbone," the chicken hawk veep snarled in a speech to the right-wing Frontiers of Freedom Institute.

In a clear reference to Cheney's draft dodging during the Vietnam War, Murtha replied, "I like guys who got five deferments and [have] never been there and send people to war, and then don't like to hear suggestions about what needs to be done."

Murtha's powerful statements echoed through the White House. Spokesman Scott McClellan, taking a page from Ann Coulter's playbook, accused Murtha of "endorsing the policy positions of ... the extreme liberal wing of the Democratic Party." Unfortunately, the Democratic Party has no significant liberal wing.

But Murtha's comments were the catalyst for a fierce debate in the House about the war. House Democrats gave Murtha a standing ovation when he entered the chamber Friday. Congresswoman Jean Schmidt (R-Ohio) attacked Murtha by quoting an Ohio Marine colonel: "He asked me to send Congress a message: stay the course. He also asked me to send Congressman Murtha a message: that cowards cut and run, Marines never do."

Democrats reacted with loud boos, shouting Schmidt down. The House came to a standstill.

Many in Congress may be catching up with the majority of Americans who want all US troops out of Iraq by the end of 2006. Two days before Murtha made his statement, the Senate approved a resolution by a vote of 79 to 19, designating 2006 as "a period of significant transition to full Iraqi sovereignty ... thereby creating the conditions for the phased redeployment of United States forces from Iraq." The resolution also requires the White House to submit unclassified reports to Congress every 90 days with details about US policy and military operations.

That resolution was passed after the Senate voted down a Democratic resolution that would have pressured Bush to

formulate a plan to reduce US forces in Iraq. Although only 13 House Democrats have endorsed Murtha's proposal to begin an immediate withdrawal from Iraq, the Los Angeles Times reported yesterday that some insiders believe a majority of them may ultimately support it.

"No matter how the White House chooses to spin it," a New York Times editorial said Thursday, "the United States Senate cast a vote of no confidence this week on the war in Iraq."

During his press conference, Murtha quoted Gen. George Casey, commander of US forces in Iraq, who told Congress in September that "the perception of occupation in Iraq is a major driving force behind the insurgency." Murtha said, "Our troops have become the primary target of the insurgency. They are united against US forces and we have become a catalyst for violence. US troops are the common enemy of the Sunnis, Saddamists and foreign jihadists."

Murtha cited the findings of a recent poll that "over 80 percent of Iraqis are strongly opposed to the presence of coalition troops, and about 45 percent of the Iraqi population believes attacks against Americans are justified." Murtha added, "I believe we need to turn Iraq over to the Iraqis."

Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington thinks the Bush administration will begin to reduce the number of US troops after the Iraqi elections in December. She predicts that Bush will leave 35,000 to 50,000 troops, sending them to the four big US bases in the four quadrants of Iraq to protect the other 10 permanent US bases.

Indeed the New York Times reported Saturday that the Pentagon is about to approve a sweeping directive to elevate "stability operations" to a core military mission on par with full-scale combat.

Bennis says there is a civil war raging in Iraq, but not a conflict between Sunni and Shi'a. It is a clash between those who support the occupation and those who oppose it. She estimates there are only about 1,000 armed terrorists - who target civilians. If the US ended its occupation, the Iraqi resistance forces would continue to fight each other for a while, but they would isolate the hard core terrorists.

Rep. John Murtha's call for an end to the occupation was echoed by Larry Johnson, a former CIA expert on terrorism. Johnson wrote in the Booman Tribune Friday, "The Iraqi insurgency consists of at least 26 different groups and draws upon as many as 250,000 supporters. These groups represent a spectrum of beliefs ranging from secular nationalists to hard core jihadists. The only thing they agree on is that they hate the invader, which is us."

Last month, William E. Odom, Director of the National Security Agency under Reagan and Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, penned an article on Antiwar.com called "We Should 'Cut & Run.'" He wrote, "We can't prevent a civil war by staying" in Iraq. "For those who really worry about destabilizing the region, the sensible policy is not to stay the course," according to Odom.

"The American public is way ahead of the members of Congress," Murtha said. The quagmire Bush created in Iraq is draining life from our soldiers and money from our coffers.

The United States should not simply withdraw some of its troops from Iraq. The occupation must end now.

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Read Other Columns By Marjorie Cohn