

## Where the Iraq War is Headed Next

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Pulitzer Prize Winning Journalist Seymour Hersh on Where the Iraq War is Headed Next

Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh of The New Yorker magazine about his new article, "Up in the Air: Where is the Iraq War Headed Next?" Hersh discusses the ongoing debate in Washington over the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, how President Bush is "impervious to political pressure" in his Iraq policy, the capability of the U.S. Army to sustain two or three more years of combat in Iraq and how a reduction of U.S. troops would be replaced by American airpower - which could lead to even more Iraqi fatalities.

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The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq continues to be a central issue in Washington. Earlier this month, Democratic Congressman John Murtha sparked an intense debate on Capitol Hill after he introduced a bill calling for an immediate withdrawal of US forces. In response, the Republican leadership moved to silence Murtha's criticism by introducing a bill that was worded in a manner designed to split the Democratic Party. The Republican bill proposed "the deployment of United States forces in Iraq be terminated immediately." It was rejected 403 to 3.

Last week, Kurdish and Sunni leaders in Iraq issued a joint communiqué calling for a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. It marked the first time Iraq's political factions collectively called for a withdrawal timetable.

In the latest news, chief Pentagon spokesman Lawrence DiRita said US forces are likely to be reduced to about 140,000 by the December 15th parliamentary elections and that deeper cuts are possible. The administration has repeatedly said it will consider pulling out troops once enough Iraqi forces have been trained to deal with the insurgency.

DiRita said President Bush is scheduled to give a speech Wednesday where he is expected highlight the progress US forces have made in turning over security to Iraqis.

In a new article in the New Yorker, Pulitzer prize-winning reporter Seymour Hersh writes "a key element of the drawdown plans not mentioned in the President's public statement is that the departing American troops will be replaced by American airpower." He goes on to write: "while the number of American casualties would decrease as ground troops are withdrawn, the over-all level of violence and the number of Iraqi fatalities would increase unless there are stringent controls over who bombs what."

- Seymour Hersh, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for The New Yorker. His latest article is titled "Up in the Air: Where is the Iraq War Headed Next?"

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh joins us now from his home in Washington, D.C. His piece in The New Yorker magazine is entitled "Up in the Air: Where is the Iraq War Headed Next?" Welcome to Democracy Now!

SEYMOUR HERSH: Hi.

AMY GOODMAN: It's good to have you with us. So, can you just lay out what you understand at this point and who your sources are telling you what the administration's plans are, or hopes are, next?

SEYMOUR HERSH: I'm not going to hold you literally to who your sources are. But obviously, for the last four years, I've been talking to people pretty much on the inside, or at least have a good smell of what's going on. And, as you said, it's real simple. We are -- I think the President will probably agree to a pullout. He could not, because he is totally committed to what he's doing. But for political purposes, a pullout won't end the war. That's the critical thing.

It won't bring victory to us. It will simply change the color, if you will, of the people who die there. Instead of American boys dying -- certainly change the nationality -- there will be more Iraqis. It doesn't mean victory. It just -- we're going to -- the Iraqi units, most of them, very few can stand up by themselves. But there's the belief in the military is that an Iraqi battalion that's hapless as it may be now, supported by more American air, any time they have a whiff of the insurgency, they can call in an air strike, that would give them enough wherewithal to withstand, at least stand up, for a couple of years, long enough to mask a complete withdrawal.

AMY GOODMAN: Why hasn't the Bush administration done this yet?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, they are doing more bombing. One of the great x-factors of the war -- this is something else that I noted in the article, is we know nothing about the bombing. Clearly there's all sorts of anecdotal reason to believe that the bombing has gone up exponentially, certainly in the last four or five months in the Sunni Triangle, the four provinces around Baghdad. There's been a lot of -- more provinces. Every day, we read about bombs falling. And we now have planes that loiter, hornets, and we have planes that come from a base in Kirkuk, I think, and they loiter in the air above potential combat areas. You know, there go three guys, throw a bomb there.

And there's no statistics. I'm one of those people that goes back to the Vietnam War, where every day we got a description and an official account of how many sorties, one mission by one plane, how much tonnage. We don't get any of those numbers in this war. We've never had those numbers. There's no embedded American journalist at an airbase -- at one of the bases in the Gulf region. I think many of the air bases right now -- some of our air bases are obviously inside Iraq. But that's pretty much, I presume, to be a classified secret, or a secret, anyway. We don't have reporters at the air bases. We don't know what's going on with the air war.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Seymour Hersh, wrote a piece in this week's New Yorker, called "Up in the Air: Where is the Iraq War Headed Next?" Sy, can you talk about John Murtha, the congressman, and the significance of what he said?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Murtha is one of those oldies, in his 70s now. He's somebody like me, I always try to get to. I can talk to some of his aides. He's on the Defense -- he's one of the leading players on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. He's a very conservative military guy, who controls the budget, not only the budget we know about, but the black budget, the covert budget. He's one of those people trusted. Jerry Lewis in the Congress is another one, a House member. In the Senate, it would be Senator Inouye of Hawaii and Senator Ted Stevens, both in their 80s, of Alaska. They run the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. These are the guys that the generals talk to. And Murtha is one, in particular. He's known for his closeness to the four-stars. They come and they bleed on him.

And so, for Murtha to suddenly say it's over, as he did three weeks ago or two weeks ago, as I wrote in this article, it drove the White House crazy. They were beyond mad, as somebody said to me, because they know that the generals are talking to him. So here you have a case where we don't have -- you know, the generals are terrified pretty much, as they always are. That's just the nature of the game. But they don't speak truth to power. They're not telling the American people exactly what's going on, and they're clearly not telling the White House, because the White House doesn't want to hear.

So Murtha's message is a message, really, from a -- you can consider it a message from a lot of generals on active duty today. This is what they think, at least a significant percentage of them, I assure you. This is, I'm not over-dramatizing this. It's a shot across the bow. They don't think it's doable. You can't tell that to this President. He doesn't want to hear it. But you can say it to Murtha, you can say it to Inouye, you can say it to Stevens.

AMY GOODMAN: It's interesting what you write, the examples of what Murtha said, the most devastating comments that he reported. "The number of attacks in Iraq has increased from a hundred and fifty a week to more than seven hundred a week in the past year. He said that an estimated fifty thousand American soldiers will suffer 'from what I call battle fatigue' in the war, and he said that the Americans were seen as 'the common enemy' in Iraq. He also took issue with one of the White House's claims -- that foreign fighters are playing a major role in the insurgency." In fact, he says, "American soldiers 'haven't captured any in this latest activity' -- the continuing battle in western Anbar province, near the border with Syria. 'So this idea that they're coming in from outside, we still think there's only seven per cent,'" Murtha said.

SEYMOUR HERSH: And most of those, you know, the Sunnis and Baathists have no love for jihadists. I mean, Saddam was always on war against jihadists, just as Asad was, the father of the son back in Syria. There's no love among the secular Baathists for any fundamentalism. And so what happens is it's very cynical. What's happened now is the insurgency welcomes -- if you want to come and be a car bomber, come on in and kill yourself. They couldn't care less. But it's not as if there's any shared responsibility there.

This is a war run by the Baathists and the Sunnis and many Iraqi citizens, who initially had no reason to dislike us, but because of the way we've behaved in the war and the way we've conducted the war with these house-to-house searches and the search-and-destroy missions and the bombing. You know, bombs don't -- they never always go where they're aimed, even though they're more accurate than ever, they're still -- even the Pentagon statistics indicate 10-15% of bombs don't go where they're aimed, even with laser guidance.

So, Murtha, yes, I was interested in the press coverage, because they did deal with what he said about Cheney and his caustic comment. But in the speech was this -- I thought the statistic that was devastating was the 50,000 statistic, of combat fatigue or whatever syndrome they call it now, more sophisticated than that word now. But my friends inside the V.A. tell me that as of late June or early July, there had been about, oh, 900-950,000 American soldiers, men and women that have gone to war since March or April of '03, by July of '05, two years and three or four months later, over

104,000 had come into the V.A. looking for help. Once they returned, rotated home, come back to V.A. hospitals, a staggering statistic. You know, you can't -- we talk about torture. And one of the things to remember about mistreating people is, you know -- this isn't cynical, but I really do mean it -- you know, the people that do the mistreatment end up being as much victims as the people they mistreat. They come home with a lot of lot of bad baggage.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Seymour Hersh, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for The New Yorker, also helped to expose the torture at Abu Ghraib in April of 2004. The issue of the generals not speaking out, how unusual is this? I mean, would anyone expect it in any administration?

SEYMOUR HERSH: No, you know, really that's -- you know, that's what we're here for. We have a congress that on any given day, you know, as I always joke, is -- I can't tell whether they're supine or prone, but they're down. You've got a dead congress that can barely move. I mean, the fear, you know, the thunderous noise of the Democrats running away from Murtha. Murtha makes this statement, and all that the Democrats do is left in the party, couldn't run away fast enough from this man. He was left alone there. Even Nancy Pelosi, nobody supported him when he called for an immediate withdrawal.

AMY GOODMAN: I mean, this is actually astounding. And then the Republicans coming forward and saying, 'Okay, we're going to put forward this proposal,' and it's -- what? -- 403 to 3. Jose Serrano, Cynthia McKinney. Now, what was wrong with the proposal, just saying withdraw immediately?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, actually, what he was saying, six months. And I would guess that if you really pushed him hard, his argument would be that once we withdraw, if -- I think every week it gets harder and harder to do this -- once you withdraw, the first thing the insurgency, the Sunnis and Baathists, would do would be to turn on the jihadists -- there's no love between them -- you know, and immediately push them out of the picture and then begin to try and get some political stake and begin to talk with the other people, the Shia and the secular, you know, Iraq. Even Shia Iraq, more Shia are secular than religious. Most people don't know that. There's many tremendous divisions inside Iraq among the Shia.

And so, a year ago, it seemed to me, the -- a year ago -- Amy, it's so crazy, because we always repeat history. In 1965, if anybody in the Democratic Party -- Bobby Kennedy once tried to tentatively suggest that the way out of the Vietnam War was talk to the North Vietnamese. You would have been laughed out of the ballpark. We don't talk to the guys we're fighting the war with. And so, clearly the way out was to talk to the Sunni and Baathist leadership. Clearly, they're organized fairly well. Obviously this insurgency is extremely well done. They've gotten, if anything, more sophisticated.

If you remember, this summer, General Casey, alas, said that the Iraqi -- the insurgency is defeated now; they're only hitting soft targets, that is, civilians. And the next thing you know, we have a hundred deaths of American soldiers in a month. I mean, that's clearly not true. They clearly can do what they want. My own guess is, and I'm told this by my friends on the inside, there's tremendous intelligence. And the Israelis, among other people, are warning us that this wonderful Green Zone that we think is such an oasis could be hit any time. They're clearly able to penetrate into that. And so, it's all up for grabs. Why not talk to them? Now, it's probably too late. I don't know what we can do to salvage the situation.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, you also write about President Bush and how his closest advisors have long been aware of the religious nature of his policy commitments. In recent interviews, one former senior official who served in Bush's first term spoke extensively about the connection between the President's religious faith and his view of the war in Iraq. Can you elaborate on this?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, it's interesting about this particular person and others with whom -- all of a sudden -- it's weird, but in the last -- people that I've been talking to for years never discuss this. All of a sudden, within the last month or so, somebody, just in the middle of a conversation about somebody else, began to talk about how the President viewed 9/11 as a challenge and sort of as a divine challenge, and the election in 2002 he saw as a sign from God, a reaffirmation. If you remember, the Republicans did very well in the off-year congressional election. And then, of course, in 2004, this president ran, didn't give one inch up on the Iraqi war, did not back off an inch and won, another sign of guidance. And so this person was saying -- I don't know whether it's true or not, but it's certainly what this person saw and heard, but I don't know what's in the President's mind. He's also committed to democracy.

But what's happening now is, I think, because he's so unreachable by common -- I think one reason the generals went to Murtha is you can't tell this to the President. I think people -- I don't want to use -- I'll just use the word, I think they're scared to death. I think some of the insiders are really scared to death that you have a president that's presiding over -- it's -- the exit plan for this war is totally dependant on the Iraqi military, which is comical. It's driven by militias. I don't know, many in your audience have probably read the wonderful Jim Fallows article in the Atlantic, which I thought was quite explicit about how bad it is. And also, nobody even mentions the Iraqi police. They're completely destroyed and useless and demoralized. So the idea that withdrawal is going to be dependant on the Iraqi police and the military is a

fantasy.

And so, what are we -- we're going to leave and increase the bombing and the Iraqis eventually -- this is what's driving the Air Force crazy is I wrote about the Iraqis will be responsible for targeting? You know, who's going to hit what? I've actually had senior intelligence people say to me that means Iran will be targeting our bombers. I mean, it's just loony. It's a loony formula.

AMY GOODMAN: Last question, and that has to do with your last section of your piece on this composite American Special Forces team, known as the S.M.U., special mission unit, in Syria.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, there's more than one. There's many of them. You know, there's more than a handful of these units. Some are in Syria, some are other places. These are combined teams that have been set up, so not any one service isn't involved. And I think, you know, obviously we think that this government believes that when it comes to a high-value target, you know, a potential al-Qaeda or believed al-Qaeda target, we can do anything we want anywhere in the world. And the world's our playpen. And I can tell you right now, inside the American intelligence community, and I'm talking about high up in the community, there's a great deal of concern about these kind of operations, because our troop go in and do what they do to people they think are Iraqis -- I mean, al-Qaeda. And it's very rough. And they don't clear it with either the State Department or the ambassador in the country or the C.I.A. chief of station. It's a formula for chaos. And it's going on now. And it's been going on for quite a while, many months. And it's a new sort of step-up in the war. And Congress? Do they want to know? I don't think so.

AMY GOODMAN: And the S.M.U.s, where else are they? The special mission units?

SEYMOUR HERSH: In places where we think there's -- you know, certainly in Iraq, and other places in the world where we think they can do some good.

AMY GOODMAN: By the way, do you believe that the secret prisons are in Romania and Poland, as Human Rights Watch believes, that the Washington Post won't name, but exposed?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, Amy, I'm actually doing some more work on it. But I will tell you this, the C.I.A. prisons are there. There have been prisons, the C.I.A. has run prisons for many, many years around the world. And I'm sure terrible things happen. But that's actually not where the real game is. They're somewhere else.

AMY GOODMAN: Where?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Other places. I'm -- let me do my reporting, and I promise I'll publish it, and I promise I'll come and talk to you about it.

AMY GOODMAN: Okay, well, Seymour Hersh, I want to thank you for being with us. His latest piece is in The New Yorker magazine; it is called "Up in the Air: Where is the Iraq War Headed Next?" Seymour Hersh, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, thanks for being with us.