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On America's Global Role
Win or withdraw? The Democrats' false dilemma

Peter Charles Choharis
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While Democrats agreed this week to strike U.S. troop withdrawal deadlines from a \$120 billion military-funding bill, many vowed to renew the fight this September when funding again runs out. Even House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, who helped craft the compromise with Republican leaders and White House officials, suggested that she might vote against the Iraq war money.

Democratic disappointment is understandable, but misplaced. For while many Democratic officials believe that last November's election was a mandate to end the war in Iraq and bring U.S. troops home as quickly as possible, the American people do not.

A poll for the American Security Project conducted by Marttila Communications during the first week of May (a portion of which is available at www.americansecurityproject.org) reveals that only 28 percent of Americans support a timetable to remove all U.S. troops within a year. By contrast, 40 percent of Americans favor removing troops only after Iraq has a basic level of security, while 30 percent more want troops to stay or even increase in order to "get the job done."

In fact, 48 percent of Americans are more concerned that "Democrats will pull American forces out too quickly, thereby strengthening the terrorists" compared to 41 percent who are more concerned that Republicans will continue "a failed policy" and keep our forces in Iraq too long.

Those who think that supporting a timetable is key to winning the Democratic presidential nomination are also mistaken. Compared to 42 percent of Democrats who want to pull out all U.S. troops within a year, 46 percent of Democrats want troops to stay until Iraq is stabilized, and another 9 percent want troops to stay or increase. Political consultants who argue that the Democratic "base" wants an immediate pullout forget

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that even Iowa caucus voters, for whom opposition to the war in Iraq was the most important issue, voted in greater numbers for 2004 presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry than for candidate Howard Dean. Congressional Democrats must stop using funding resolutions to register discontent with President Bush's failed policies. For as Kerry discovered after he voted against the \$87 billion supplemental, no matter how hard Democrats try to portray their votes as pressuring the Bush administration to change course, they will always be vulnerable to charges of undermining the mission and the troops.

Just as importantly, Democratic leaders must stop talking about Iraq in terms of defeat and withdrawal, and start defining a realistic victory and a plan to achieve it. Nearly 8 out of 10 Americans believe that Iraq is in a civil war, according to the ASP poll, and nearly two-thirds don't want U.S. troops involved in it. The challenge is to develop a policy that can sustain U.S. popular support by reducing the exposure of U.S. troops, while increasing security in Iraq and the region. As National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley concluded six months ago, the al-Maliki government is incapable of resolving tough political issues. Predicating future funding on Iraq achieving political benchmarks is setting up the Iraq (and the U.S.) government for failure. And because conditions can always be spun as improving, predicating funding on a presidential certification that the surge is working also makes no sense.

Popular voting has been one of Iraq's few democratic achievements. To succeed, a peace process must by-pass the paralyzed Parliament and let Iraqis determine their own fate. The Iraqi Constitution mandates a popular referendum by the end of this year to resolve whether Kirkuk should be part of Kurdistan. The U.N. mandate for coalition forces also expires at year's end. In addition to the Kirkuk vote, Iraqis throughout the country should decide whether they want a strong central government as envisioned by President Bush or a partitioned nation along sectarian lines as Sen. Joe Biden, D-Del., and others have proposed. At the same time, Iraqis -- not the Parliament -- should vote on whether to have coalition forces stay. To expedite matters, the United Nations should run the elections. Finally, Democrats should take steps to stabilize the region, including more funding for refugees and military assistance to countries such as Lebanon and Ethiopia that are fighting al Qaeda affiliates.

The ASP poll reports that a majority of Americans (including Democrats) support partitioning Iraq. If Democrats present this as their Plan B, Americans will stand with them. But if congressional Democrats continue voting for withdrawal and a funding cutoff, even many Democratic voters will find it difficult to support "defeat."

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