

**Testimony of Andrew J. Bacevich**

**Senate Armed Services Committee**

**April 9, 2008**

Thank you for the opportunity to present my views to this committee. I will focus my remarks on two issues: near-term prospects in Iraq and the war's larger strategic implications.

The bottom line assessment to which I will return is this: the United States today finds itself with too much war and too few warriors. We face a large and growing gap between our military commitments and our military capabilities. Something has to give.

Let me begin with the current situation in Iraq: Although violence there has decreased over the past year, attacks on coalition and Iraqi security forces continue to occur at an average rate of 500 per week. This is clearly unacceptable. The likelihood that further U. S. efforts will reduce violence to an acceptable level – however one might define that term – appears remote.

Meanwhile, our military capacity, especially our ability to keep substantial numbers of boots on the ground, is eroding. If the surge is working as some claim, then why not sustain it? Indeed, why not reinforce that success by sending another 30 or 60 or 90 thousand reinforcements?

The answer to that question is self-evident: because the necessary troops don't exist. The cupboard is bare.

Furthermore, recent improvements in security are highly contingent. The Shiite militias, Sunni insurgents, and tribal leaders who have agreed to refrain from violence in return for arms, money, and other concessions have by no means bought into the American vision for the future of Iraq. Their interests do not coincide with our own and we should not delude ourselves by pretending otherwise.

It is as if in an effort to bring harmony to a fractious, dysfunctional family, we have forged marriages of convenience with as many of that family's members as possible. Our disparate partners will abide by their vows only so long as they find it convenient to do so.

Unfortunately, partial success in reducing the level of violence has not translated into any substantial political gains. Recall that the purpose of the surge was not to win the war in a military sense. General Petraeus never promised victory. He and any number of other senior officers have assessed the war as militarily unwinnable.

On this point, the architects of the surge were quite clear: the object of the exercise was not to impose our will on the enemy but to facilitate political reconciliation among Iraqis.

A year later signs of genuine reconciliation are few. In an interview with the *Washington Post* less than a month ago, General Petraeus said that "no one" in the U.S. government "feels that there has been sufficient progress by any means in the area of national reconciliation." While it may be nice that the Kurds have begun to display the Iraqi flag alongside their own, to depict such grudging concessions as evidence of an emerging national identity is surely to grasp at straws.

So although the level of violence has subsided somewhat, the war remains essentially stalemated. Iraq today qualifies only nominally as a sovereign nation-state. In reality it has become a dependency of the United States, unable to manage its own affairs or to provide for the well-being of its own people. As recent events in Basra have affirmed, the Iraqi army, a black hole into which the Pentagon has poured some \$22 billion in aid and assistance, still cannot hold its own against armed militias.

The costs to the United States of sustaining this dependency are difficult to calculate with precision, but figures such as \$3 billion per week and 30 to 40 American lives per month provide a good approximation.

What can we expect to gain in return for this investment? The Bush administration was counting on the Iraq War to demonstrate the viability of

its Freedom Agenda and to affirm the efficacy of the Bush Doctrine of preventive war.

Measured in those terms, the war has long since failed. Rather than showcasing our ability to transform the Greater Middle East, Operation Iraqi Freedom has demonstrated just the opposite. Using military power as an instrument for imprinting liberal values in this part of the world has produced a failed state while fostering widespread antipathy toward the United States.

Rather than demonstrating our ability to eliminate emerging threats swiftly, decisively, and economically – Saddam Hussein’s removal providing an object lesson to other tyrants tempted to contest our presence in the Middle East – the Iraq War has revealed the limits of American power and called into question American competence. The Bush Doctrine hasn’t worked. Saddam is long gone, but we’re stuck. Rather than delivering decisive victory, preventive war has landed us in a quagmire.

The abject failure of the Freedom Agenda and the Bush Doctrine has robbed the Iraq War of any strategic rationale. The war continues in large part because of our refusal to acknowledge and confront this loss of strategic purpose.

Now there are members of this committee who have written of their admiration for Reinhold Niebuhr. I share in that admiration. Perhaps not surprisingly, the great Protestant theologian has much to say of relevance to this issue. Niebuhr once observed that “even the wisest statecraft cannot create social tissue. It can cut, sew, and redesign social fabric to a limited degree. But the social fabric upon which it works must be ‘given’.”

In Iraq, to the extent that any meaningful social fabric has ever existed, events have now shredded it beyond repair. Persisting in our efforts to stitch Iraq back together will exhaust our army, divert attention from other urgent problems at home and abroad, and squander untold billions, most of which we are borrowing from foreign countries.

Therefore, the best way to close the gap between too much war and too few warriors is to reduce our commitments. That means ending the U. S. combat role in Iraq. It means exerting ourselves, primarily through diplomatic means, to limit the adverse consequences caused by our ill-advised crusade in Iraq. It means devising a new strategy to address the threat posed by the violent Islamic radicalism, to replace the failed strategy of the Freedom Agenda and the Bush Doctrine.

This reformulation of strategy should begin with an explicit abrogation of preventive war. It should include a candid recognition that

invading and occupying an Islamic nation in hopes of transforming it qualifies as a fantasy.

There are people of good will who will disagree with this assessment. They will insist that we have no choice but to persevere in Iraq – although to say that the world’s sole superpower has “no choice” in the matter suggests a remarkable failure of imagination. They will insist further that restoring the social fabric of Iraq – engineering the elusive political reconciliation that will stabilize the country -- remains an imperative.

To the extent that this counsel carries the day, then the predictable result will be to exacerbate even further the problem of having too much war and too few warriors.

War is the realm of uncertainty. There’s always some chance of catching a lucky break. Perhaps next year the Iraqis will get their act together and settle their internal differences. Perhaps next year Congress will balance the federal budget. Such developments are always possible – they are also highly unlikely.

When it comes to Iraq, a far more likely prospect is the following: if the United States insists on continuing its war there, the United States will get what it wants: the war will continue indefinitely. According to General Petraeus, a counterinsurgency is typically a ten to twelve year proposition.

Given that assessment, and with the "surge" now giving way to a "pause," U. S. combat operations in Iraq could easily drag on for another five or ten years. A large-scale U. S. military presence might be required for two or three decades.

In that event, the conflict that already ranks as the second longest in our history will claim the title of longest. Already our second most expensive war, it will become in financial terms the costliest of all. On one point at least, Donald Rumsfeld will be able to claim vindication: Iraq will indeed have become a "long slog."

For the United States to pursue this course would in my judgment qualify as a misjudgment of epic proportions. Yet if our political leaders insist on the necessity of fighting this open-ended war, then they owe it to those who have already borne five years of combat to provide some relief.

Bluntly, if those in Washington are unable or unwilling to reduce the number of wars in which U. S. forces are engaged, then surely they ought to increase the number of warriors available to fight them.

Today, in a nation that according to President Bush is "at war," approximately one-half of one-percent of the population is in uniform. Double that figure and the problem of too much war for too few warriors

goes away. The United States will have the troops necessary to sustain Iraq (and Afghanistan) for years to come.

I do not want to minimize the challenges, political as well as economic, inherent in any such effort to expand our military. They would be large. But I will insist that continuing on our present course in which soldiers head back to Iraq for their third and fourth combat tours while the rest of the country heads to the mall will break the army before it produces policy success. Worse, our present course – in which a few give their all while most give nothing -- is morally indefensible.

If the war in Iraq is as important as some claim, then sustaining that war merits a commitment on the part of the American people, both to fight the war and to pay for it. If neither the American people nor their political leaders are willing to make such a commitment, then the war clearly does not qualify as genuinely important. Our loudly proclaimed determination to “support the troops” rings hollow.

The choice is one that we can no longer afford to dodge: it’s either less war or more warriors. I urge the members of this committee to give this matter the attention it deserves.

Thank you.