June 15, 2006

The SPEAKER pro tempore: Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. DeFazio) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. DeFAZIO: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to discuss H.Res. 861. The Republican leadership has been promising for weeks that the House would have a genuine debate about the future of U.S. military involvement in Iraq. Given that promise, I am disappointed that H.Res. 861 is a truly hollow effort. Despite the eloquent words used, the resolution has no legally binding impact. It does nothing to require a re-evaluation of U.S. policies in Iraq or to change the status quo. It does nothing to address the mistakes that have been made in Iraq. The American people, particularly our troops serving honorably in difficult circumstances in Iraq, deserve more than cheerleading and sloganeering. Unfortunately, empty promises are all this resolution offers.

A vote for this resolution is a vote for the status quo. It is a vote for staying indefinitely in Iraq, perhaps a decade or longer. It is a vote for continuing with the current policies with no end in sight. I cannot support endorsing the status quo. On March 21, 2006, President Bush actually said that the question of bringing home U.S. troops from Iraq "will be decided by future presidents," signaling that U.S. troops will not be home until 2009 at the earliest. The American people need to understand that a vote in favor of this resolution is a vote to stay in Iraq until at least 2009.

Let me address my specific concerns with the text of the resolution.

First, I am concerned that the resolution inappropriately lumps Iraq in with the so-called global war on terror. It was Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda who attacked the U.S. on September 11, 2001, not Saddam Hussein and Iraq. I believe it was a mistake to move intelligence and military assets away from the fight against al-Qaeda, which did not have a presence in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion, in order to attack Iraq. Iraq did not pose a direct threat to U.S. national security, had not attacked the U.S., and could be contained with sanctions, inspections, and no-fly zones.

Second, and perhaps of most concern, the resolution endorses keeping U.S. troops in Iraq until there is a "sovereign, free, secure, and united Iraq." By that standard, the U.S. will be in Iraq for a decade or more. That is unacceptable and unnecessary. And, in fact, it undermines U.S. national security by indefinitely tying up U.S. intelligence and military assets that could be better used finding Osama bin Laden and breaking the back of al-Qaeda around the world.

The U.S. cannot impose freedom, security, and unity in Iraq by force. Those worthy goals can only be achieved by the Iraqi people themselves, which will only happen when the Iraqi people and their leaders decide to put aside their sectarian differences. The U.S. cannot force Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds to make peace or to act for the common good. They have been in conflict for 1,400 years. Nor should the U.S. military be forced to remain in Iraq essentially as an army for one side of a civil war. As long as the U.S. military remains stuck with the president's pledge of unending, open-ended support, Iraqi politicians and security forces will use the U.S. presence as a crutch. Establishing a timeline to bring the bulk of our troops home and redeploy others to fight al-Qaeda would force the Iraqi people, politicians and security forces to resolve their differences, establish an effective and inclusive government, end sectarian violence and create a secure society. The U.S. military cannot solve the sectarian problems in Iraq. Only the Iraqis can.

Proponents of the resolution say that those like me who want our troops to come home are defeatist and want to cut and run from Iraq.

To the contrary, I believe the U.S. military has already done all that has been asked of them. Saddam Hussein is on trial. The threat from alleged weapons of mass destruction programs in Iraq has been neutralized. The programs do not exist, and didn't before the war for that matter. The Iraqi people have written and adopted a new constitution and elected a new government. It is time to turn over control of the country to the Iraqi government, Iraqi security forces, and the Iraqi people to build their own future.

Second, the resolution contains the blatantly false assertion that negotiating a timeline for bringing U.S. troops home with the Iraqi government undermines U.S. national security. Such a statement shows a misunderstanding of the enemy we face in Iraq.

Although today the president and proponents of this resolution fail to distinguish between the various enemies we face in Iraq, in a speech on December 12, 2005, the president actually did

make important distinctions between the insurgent elements in Iraq. He mentioned "rejectionists," which are mostly Sunni Arabs who miss the privileged status they enjoyed under Saddam Hussein. He mentioned "Saddamists", who are former regime elements who want to return to power. Again, they are Sunni Arabs. And, he mentioned foreign terrorists affiliated with or inspired by al-Qaeda, which even the president acknowledged was the "smallest" element of the insurgency. The one huge element he left out was nationalist Shias, such as those influenced by Moqtada al-Sadr.

The reality is that the rejectionists, Saddamists, and nationalist Shias, who combined make up the vast bulk of the insurgents in Iraq, have no interest in attacking the U.S. homeland. They just want U.S. military forces out of their own country. They have no designs on our country. So it is misleading, at best, to argue that if we don't fight the insurgents there, we will fight them in the streets of the United States. Even the foreign terrorist elements in Iraq seem more focused on igniting a Shia-Sunni civil war in the Middle East and attacking regimes they consider infidels in the region, such the Jordanian monarchy.

It is also misleading to pretend that if the U.S. leaves that somehow Osama bin Laden will take control of Iraq. There is no chance that the Shias and Kurds, who represent around 80 percent of the population in Iraq, will allow foreign terrorist elements to take over the country. Even the majority of the Sunnis have grown tired of foreign terrorists operating in Iraq.

With respect to the argument about waiting us out, as long as the Sunni, Shia and Kurds cannot resolve their political differences, violence will continue in Iraq. It is not a matter of whether we're there or not. It is ridiculous to assume that the insurgent elements will stop attacking once a timeline for bringing U.S. troops home is announced and will wait to start again until after we leave.

I believe that negotiating a timeline for bringing U.S. forces home is a prerequisite for stabilizing Iraq over the next several months.

Announcing the termination of the open-ended U.S. military commitment in Iraq and providing a concrete plan, including a timeline negotiated with the Iraqi government, for bringing our troops home would undermine support for insurgents. Public opinion polls show that nearly 9 in 10 Iraqis support announcing a timeline for U.S. withdrawal and 70 percent want the U.S. out by the end of 2007. The U.S. cannot want to stay in Iraq more than the Iraqis themselves want us there.

As, the Commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, General George Casey, testified to Congress last year, "the perception of occupation in Iraq is a major driving force behind the insurgency." A specific withdrawal plan, with benchmarks for measuring success in stabilizing Iraq, could unite Iraqis, Sunni, Shia and Kurd, against the foreign terrorists operating in Iraq. That would be a key turning point in stabilizing the country.

A timeline for bringing U.S. troops home that is negotiated with the Iraqi government would also boost the Iraqi government's legitimacy and claim to self-rule, and force the Iraqi government to take responsibility for itself and its citizens. Negotiating a timeline and strategy with the Iraqi government could, more than possibly anything else, improve the standing of the Iraqi government in the eyes of its own people, a significant achievement in a region in which the standing of rulers and governments is generally low.

Similarly, establishing a firm timeline for bringing our troops home could accelerate the development of Iraqi security forces and deepen their commitment to defending their own country and their own government. It would eliminate the conflict they now feel by working with what many of them see as an occupying force. It would allow them to defend a sovereign Iraqi government, rather than fight alongside U.S. forces.

A plan to bring the bulk of our troops home from Iraq and free up intelligence and defense assets to redeploy to fight al-Qaeda, particularly in Afghanistan and along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, could also help the United States in our broader fight against Islamic extremists with global ambitions. It would make the U.S. safer by taking away a recruiting tool and training ground. Former Director of the CIA, Porter Goss, testified to Congress that, "Islamic extremists are exploiting the Iraqi conflict to recruit new anti-U.S. jihadists. These jihadists who survive will leave Iraq experienced and focused on acts of urban terrorism." He went on to say, "The Iraq conflict, while not a cause of extremism, has become a cause for extremists."

In addition to a timeline, I have proposed that U.S. troops be removed from front line combat positions in Iraqi cities and towns, turning over daily security patrols, interactions with citizens, and any offensive security actions to the Iraqis themselves. The training and equipping of Iraqi security forces should be accelerated. The U.S. must renounce any U.S. interest in constructing permanent U.S. military bases in Iraq. It is also important to accelerate reconstruction spending and grant the bulk of reconstruction contracts to local companies employing Iraqis rather than multinational corporations, whom have proven inefficient, inflexible, sometimes fraudulent and

have even imported workers rather than employing Iraqis. The U.S. embassy in Baghdad should also be reduced to normal size and authority rather than establishing one of the largest embassies in the world.

Third, I am concerned that the resolution continues to mislead the American people about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. Saddam Hussein was a brutal tyrant. I am glad he is now on trial for crimes against humanity. But, opposition to a dictator is not the measure I use when deciding whether to send our men and women in uniform off to war and possible death. For me, there must be a direct threat to U.S. national security to justify the sacrifice of the blood and wealth of fellow Americans. In the case of Iraq, I didn't see that. The resolution claims that Hussein "supported terrorists" and "constituted a grave threat against global peace and security." Saddam Hussein did pay the families of Palestinian suicide bombers. So in that sense he did support terrorists, but he did not support the terrorists who attacked the U.S. The 9/11 Commission and other experts have found no operational links between Iraq and al-Qaeda. Further, as I previously mentioned, Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction programs and could be contained by sanctions, inspections and no-fly zones.

Finally, I would like to bring my colleagues attention to a survey of 100 top foreign policy experts just released by the Center for American Progress and Foreign Policy magazine. The survey indicates that despite the cheerleading we're hearing on the House floor today, the U.S. is not winning the war against Islamic terrorists and Iraq has undermined our efforts. More than 80 percent of the experts surveyed believe the U.S. is becoming less safe. Even 71 percent of the self-identified conservative experts said the U.S. is not winning the war on terror. Twenty-eight percent of respondents, including 26 percent of the conservatives, said the Iraq war is the principal reason the U.S. is less safe, second only to the more generic reason of rising Muslim hostility toward the U.S. An astonishing 87 percent of respondents, including 69 percent of conservatives said that the war in Iraq has had a negative impact on U.S. security and nearly 60 percent said the U.S. needs to put more focus on bringing our troops home. The results of this survey of top foreign policy experts from across the ideological spectrum are sobering and directly contradict the blind optimism and endorsement of the status quo that is reflected in H.Res. 861.

It is unfortunate that the Republican leadership continues to prohibit an open and honest debate about the fight against radical Islamic terrorists like al-Qaeda, and the distinct issue of the best strategy for bringing our troops home from Iraq. The American people deserve better.