

Hoosier wisdom

by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Most of official Washington had gone home Monday night when Sen. Richard G. Lugar, R-Ind., made an unannounced 50-minute speech on the floor of the Senate. In years to come, it may be remembered as the moment when America's tragic misadventure in Iraq began to turn in a positive direction.

Lugar, a 31-year Senate veteran, arguably is its most respected voice on foreign affairs. On Monday, he broke with his president and the leader of his party - George W. Bush - and urged him to begin drawing down troop levels. He urged his fellow senators to "take a step back from the sloganeering rhetoric and political opportunism that has sometimes characterized this debate" and consider the long-term future of U.S. interests in the Middle East.

"In my judgment, our course in Iraq has lost contact with our vital national security interests in the Middle East and beyond," Lugar said. "Our continuing absorption with military activities in Iraq is limiting our diplomatic assertiveness there and elsewhere in the world."

In some ways, Lugar's speech recalls the break of Sen. J. William Fulbright, D-Ark., with President Lyndon B. Johnson over Vietnam in 1966. Until Fulbright - like Lugar, one of the Senate's most respected voices on foreign policy - stepped forward, Johnson's war policies had enjoyed nearly unquestioned support in his own party.

Lugar's change of heart may make it easier for other Republicans to break with the president, as one did on Tuesday: Ohio's Sen. George Voinovich sent a letter to the president urging him to begin developing a plan for getting out of Iraq. Lugar is an old-school Republican who, although an institution in the Hoosier State, never has been embraced by the social conservative base that now controls his party. Still, wiser heads among Republicans - and, for that matter, among Democrats - should heed his warning and change the tone and terms of the Iraq debate.

He urged the president and his fellow lawmakers not to lose sight of America's broader interests in the Middle East. He noted that Iraq is not the issue any more; it's long-term stability in the Middle East.

"We risk becoming fixated on artificial notions of achieving victory or avoiding defeat, when these ill-defined concepts have little relevance to our operations in Iraq," Lugar said. "What is important is not the precise configuration of the Iraqi government or the achievement of specific benchmarks, but rather how Iraq impacts our geostrategic situation in the Middle East and beyond Nations throughout the Middle East are scrambling to find their footing as regional power balances shift in unpredictable ways."

To protect U.S. interests in the region, Lugar would station a residual U.S. combat force in the Middle East and ramp up a full diplomatic effort. He suggested that the opulent U.S. embassy now under construction in Baghdad might serve as the headquarters for a quasi-permanent forum where the nations of the region could discuss common interests and goals.

"If we are to seize opportunities to preserve these interests," Lugar said, "the administration and Congress must suspend what has become almost knee-jerk political combat over Iraq. Those who offer constructive criticism of the surge strategy are not defeatists, any more than those who warn against a precipitous withdrawal are militarists. We need to move Iraq policy beyond the politics of the moment and re-establish a broad consensus on the role of the United States in the Middle East."

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