

A 'bad-news' Iraq scenario for Dems

by Robert_J_Caldwell

Congressional Democrats, unable to force an American withdrawal from Iraq or block the troop surge now in place, count the September progress report by U.S. commander Gen. David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker as their next opportunity. They may be in for a surprise.

Democrats who had long since counted the surge a failure - in some cases before it began - assumed that Petraeus and Crocker could report nothing better than a net assessment of little overall change in dismal Iraq. In that event, the Democrats could hope that enough disheartened Republicans would join them to compel a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops.

But what if Petraeus comes back in September to report that the troop surge coupled with his new counterinsurgency strategy is, in fact, working?

There is mounting evidence to believe that is exactly what Petraeus will report. Even now, with more than a month to go before the mid-September report date, U.S. forces have achieved some remarkable successes.

Anbar province, once a hotbed of Sunni insurgency and the surge's top priority target after greater Baghdad, has seen a stunning turnaround. Sunni tribal sheiks, the real powers in much of Anbar, are siding with U.S. forces against a common enemy - the terrorists of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Attacks against U.S. troops and Iraqi government forces in Ramadi, Anbar's once ultra-violent provincial capital, have all but ceased.

Al-Qaeda is on the run almost everywhere in Iraq. U.S. commanders report it has no safe haven left in any Iraqi population center.

Diyala province and especially its capital of Baquba, formerly a refuge for al-Qaeda cells fleeing Anbar, is being reclaimed in a major offensive by U.S. and Iraqi government troops.

Shiite vs. Sunni sectarian violence, the greatest long-term threat to the U.S. mission in Iraq, is down by more than 50 percent in greater Baghdad. The anti-American Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi army militia are quiescent, perhaps partly because of pressure from Iraq's Shiite-dominated government.

Even if Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his government have as yet made little progress in forging Shiite vs. Sunni reconciliation, the military successes Petraeus can cite would preclude Democrats' writing off the surge as a failure.

That, in turn, would pose serious political problems for the Democrats and their get-out-of-Iraq-now agenda.

House Majority Whip James Clyburn told The Washington Post last week that a strongly positive report by Petraeus would split House Democrats and all but stop their drive to force a timetable for U.S. withdrawal.

Specifically, Clyburn said a positive Petraeus report would strongly influence the votes of 47 moderate to conservative Democrats, members of the so-called Blue Dog caucus. Without the Blue Dogs, Democrats would have no hope of passing legislation fixing a timetable for U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.

The Blue Dogs' prospective willingness to give a winning strategy more time reflects a core truth overlooked by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other get-out-of-Iraq-now zealots among congressional Democrats. A majority of Americans currently view the Iraq war as a mistake, but they don't want to see the United States defeated if that can be avoided. Thus polls show at least a plurality opposing an unconditional retreat from Iraq, which is what Pelosi and her liberal minions favor.

For Democrats, the blunt truth is that Pelosi and company have overreached. They've become so heavily invested in an American failure in Iraq, and concurrently in a repudiation of a president they plainly detest, that they've lost sight of the overriding national security interests of the United States.

A positive report next month from Gen. Petraeus would, in effect, expose that overreach. If America's highly regarded commander in Iraq makes a credible case for progress and hope, Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid won't have the votes in either the House or Senate to force a de facto U.S. surrender.

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