Bipartisan solution is needed to end U.S. presence in Iraq

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ARMY Gen. David H. Petraeus's much-anticipated report to Congress this week on progress in Iraq reportedly will include his acceptance of a moderate pullback of troops. Bipartisan resolve is needed to end the military nightmare in Iraq without creating chaos that could be much worse for the region.

Petraeus, the top American commander in Iraq, reportedly told President Bush last week that he wants to maintain heightened troop levels into next year but could accept pullback of 4,000 troops in January. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has hoped to forge a consensus of members of Congress on how to proceed in Iraq, which might mean deeper troop reductions sooner that Petraeus wants.

To his credit, Hawaii's Rep. Neil Abercrombie, an opponent of U.S. involvement in Iraq from the start, has led a recent attempt to achieve bipartisan agreement on how to proceed. In July, he obtained overwhelming support in the House Armed Services Committee for his bill that would give the Bush administration 60 days to inform Congress of the Pentagon's plan for troop redeployments in Iraq.

Democratic leaders blocked consideration of the bill on the House floor prior to the August recess. "They allowed a few people in the progressive caucus to have veto power over everything," Abercrombie told the Washington Post.

In a letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer, 10 Democrats and three Republicans demanded consideration of the Abercrombie bill, saying, "Congress needs to make clear to the American people that we can and will work across the partisan divide on such issues of such profound importance." Pelosi indicated she will bring the bill to a vote, along with a measure aimed at mollifying antiwar Democrats who have wanted to deny Republicans the opportunity to claim skepticism about Bush's policy.

It now is becoming clear that sizable U.S. troop levels in Iraq will extend well into the next administration. Although Abercrombie contends that American troops could vacate Iraq in three or four months, the consensus among most Democratic presidential candidates is that it would take a year or more.

"If you look at how we would have to take our troops out, plus the equipment, which we would not want to leave, plus what we do with the Iraqis who sided with us -- thousands of them -- plus more than 100,000 American contractors who are there -- this is a massive, complicated undertaking," said Sen. Hillary Clinton, the frontrunner.

Recent reports, including one by the congressional Government Accountability Office, have painted a pessimistic picture of the Iraqi government's ability to function without U.S. support. The best incentive for Iraqis to achieve that capability might be for U.S. troops to begin leaving at a responsible pace.