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# Need timetable for pullout

By **RUSS FEINGOLD**

**T**wo weeks ago, I joined four other senators in traveling to Iraq. My impressions from the trip — the shock expressed by my colleagues at the deterioration of the general security situation, the pride of our forces in Fallujah when they describe the relative calm that prevails there today and the different answers I received from everyone when I asked, "Who is the enemy here?" — reinforce my belief that the situation in Iraq is tremendously complex and the stakes are very high.

But I also know that a complex situation is no excuse for a vague policy or a mission set adrift.

While I was in Baghdad, a coalition officer confided to me that he believed a U.S. timetable for pulling out would "take the wind out of the sails" of the insurgents. The administration has had no problem setting timetables in Iraq for the both the election and the transfer of sovereignty.

By setting a clear timetable for reducing the U.S. military presence in a responsible way, we can undermine the motivation of jihadis from around the world who come to Iraq to fight Americans. We should be focused on fighting and defeating terrorist networks that wish to do us harm around the world.

We should not be contributing to a situation in which Iraq has become the prime training ground for terrorists who will then fan out around the world, much as Afghanistan was before Sept. 11.

If we know how many Iraqi troops we need to train and how much training is required to instill real competence and how many trainers we have, then we ought to have a sense of how much time it will take for Iraqi forces to assume the responsibilities that our troops are bearing. In other words, it should not be hard to come up with a timetable — one that is flexible and linked to clear achievements, not rigid or arbitrary.

The American people are being told that there is no way to know when our troops could come home. There is nothing mysterious about developing a clear strategic plan and asserting clear goals.

Consider two recent successes that have been, rightly, much heralded by the administration.

The United States set a date for trans-

ferring sovereignty to an Iraqi government, and then we followed through, one day early. And the U.S. responded to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's insistence on the need for early elections by calling for voting by a set date.

Working with Iraq's interim government, the United Nations, coalition forces, Iraqi forces and the courageous people of Iraq, we stuck to the plan and all of us gained a much-needed burst of optimism from the balloting day itself.

Clear goals and timeframes have resulted in clear results in these cases.

There are real political and strategic advantages to clarifying our timeframe.

Uncertainty about just how long our troops plan to stay in Iraq feeds into the suspicion and conspiracy theories about U.S. intentions that are already prevalent in the region.

Those who should be our allies, like aspiring Iraqi leaders looking for ways to unite the country across ethnic lines and emphasize Iraqi national identity, are bound to feel increasing pressure to call for U.S. withdrawal.

By setting out a clear timetable, we can remove one potential problem from their already full plate.

The most common argument against clarifying how long we plan to keep troops in Iraq goes something like this: If we reveal a timetable, insurgents and terrorists will simply lay in wait, emerging in force to achieve their goals once we are gone.

But any responsible timetable for U.S. withdrawal would be based on the establishment of a competent Iraqi force. Americans won't leave until that force is ready. An Iraqi force, which would not suffer from translator shortages or cultural differences, is the right force to handle any resurgent threat.

Our troops on the ground are truly amazing in their resolve, their professionalism and their sincere desire to help the people of Iraq. I do not have words to describe how very proud I am of all the servicemen and women, particularly those from Wisconsin, whom I met with in Iraq.

And I am even more convinced that we do them no favors when we fail to articulate a clear and responsible plan to bring them home.

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