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U.S. House of Representatives

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ROBERT L. SIMMONS, STAFF DIRECTOR

August 11, 2006

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

With war raging throughout the Middle East, the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the ongoing challenges of Iran's and North Korea's nuclear weapons programs, and yesterday's thwarted terrorist attacks from the United Kingdom, we face multiple strategic challenges. Yet, with reports that more than 1,800 civilians were killed in Baghdad during July, it is clear that the war in Iraq is at a critical and dire phase. As we pour more U.S. and Iraqi forces into Baghdad from elsewhere around that country in an effort to quell the rising tide of sectarian violence and restore some sense of order in the Iraqi capital, it is clear to me that the war hangs on a razor's edge. President Maliki has chosen to put his and American resources into stemming sectarian violence in Baghdad because he knows the risk of civil war if Baghdad continues to disintegrate. This week, Lieutenant General Peter Chiarelli called the current fight in Baghdad "the defining battle." I believe that future historians will look back on this period and see this Battle for Baghdad as the decisive battle in the Iraq war, much the way the Battle of Midway was in the Pacific theater of World War II.

The war was not won at Midway and it will not be won at Baghdad, either. But it was at Midway where we damaged the enemy severely, seized the strategic initiative, and shortly thereafter began the offensive that eventually lead to our hard-fought victory over Japan, more than three years later. If the Iraqi forces, fighting with the Americans, can demonstrate their capability and can defeat the sectarian militias that would fracture their nation, a similar opportunity may present itself and we and the Iraqis must be prepared to seize it. Too often in this war have we seen hard-won tactical success at places such as Fallujah and Ramadi erode before our senior policy makers and military commanders have been able to capitalize on it at the operational and strategic levels. Therefore, there must be a plan in place to immediately sustain the victory in Baghdad itself, and to leverage the momentum created by that victory to quickly bring similar results to the rest of the country.

This plan must rely in large part on the capabilities and political will of the Iraqi forces and people. Any plan to build and maintain the unity of their country must put Iraqis at the center. Under conditions of success in Baghdad, we should continue to offer our support and expertise even as I believe we must implement the “United States Policy in Iraq Act” enacted last year. 2006 must be a year of “significant transition” of which a well-planned effort to restore order to areas overcome by sectarian violence can be a significant part. Nevertheless, the phased redeployment of American forces and transition of missions in Iraq over time must be part of that effort. I would like to understand what planning is underway for the next phase of an effort after the battle in Baghdad—what the role of Iraqi forces would be and what the assumptions are about the role and posture of American forces.

If, on the other hand, in coming weeks we see that the sectarian violence in Baghdad continues at current levels or escalates, we will need to realistically reevaluate our overall situation in Iraq. We cannot sustain an endeavor such as this indefinitely; our military forces are already stretched to the near-breaking point and the American people have little appetite for what seems to be an unending conflict with little to show for the effort. Without a relatively quick tactical success in Baghdad, we cannot achieve strategic success in Iraq. If we are unable to bring some order to the capital city, it will be because Baghdad is in the midst of a larger struggle between Shi’a and Sunni Iraqis for control of Iraq. That is by definition a civil war. We cannot place our valiant service men and women in a no-win position caught between those warring factions. In that event, we must have a plan to disengage our troops from the midst of an Iraqi implosion, while keeping them properly postured to remain engaged in the wider war on terror in the region.

While I sincerely hope this latter scenario does not come to pass, I firmly believe we must plan for both outcomes. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you or your senior advisers and continue to be extraordinarily proud of all that our men and women in uniform are doing every day in Iraq and around the world.

Sincerely,



Ike Skelton
Ranking Member

CF:
The Honorable Donald H. Rumsfeld
The Honorable Condoleezza Rice
The Honorable Gordon England
General Peter Pace