

October 26, 2005

Senator Kerry's Speech at Georgetown University

Excerpts of remarks as prepared for delivery

Kerry speaks from his heart and conscience on Iraq:

"A few weeks ago I departed Iraq from Mosul. Three Senators and staff were gathered in the forward part of a C-130. In the middle of the cavernous cargo hold was a simple, aluminum coffin with a small American flag draped over it. We were bringing another American soldier, just killed, home to his family and final resting place.

The starkness of his coffin in the center of the hold, the silence except for the din of the engines, was a real time cold reminder of the consequences of decisions for which we Senators share responsibility.

As we arrived in Kuwait, a larger flag was transferred to fully cover his coffin and we joined graves registration personnel in giving him an honor guard as he was ceremoniously carried from plane to a waiting truck. When the doors clunked shut, I wondered why all of America would not be allowed to see him arrive at Dover Air Force Base instead of hiding him from a nation that deserves to mourn together in truth and in the light of day. His lonely journey compels all of us to come to grips with our choices in Iraq.

The Challenge in Iraq:

Now more than 2,000 brave Americans have given their lives, and several hundred thousand more have done everything in their power to wade through the ongoing internal civil strife in Iraq. An Iraq which increasingly is what it was not before the war -- a breeding ground for homegrown terrorists and a magnet for foreign terrorists. We are entering a make or break six

month period, and I want to talk about the steps we must take if we hope to bring our troops home within a reasonable timeframe from an Iraq that's not permanently torn by irrepressible conflict.

Kerry Defends The Right to Dissent:

It is never easy to discuss what has gone wrong while our troops are in constant danger. I know this dilemma first-hand. After serving in war, I returned home to offer my own personal voice of dissent. I did so because I believed strongly that we owed it to those risking their lives to speak truth to power. We still do.

In fact, while some say we can't ask tough questions because we are at war, I say no – in a time of war we must ask the hardest questions of all. It's essential if we want to correct our course and do what's right for our troops instead of repeating the same mistakes over and over again. No matter what the President says, asking tough questions isn't pessimism, it's patriotism.

The Truth About How We Got Here:

The country and the Congress were misled into war. I regret that we were not given the truth; as I said more than a year ago, knowing what we know now, I would not have gone to war in Iraq. And knowing now the full measure of the Bush Administration's duplicity and incompetence, I doubt there are many members of Congress who would give them the authority they abused so badly. I know I would not. The truth is, if the Bush Administration had come to the United States Senate and acknowledged there was no "slam dunk case" that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, acknowledged that Iraq was not connected to 9/11, there never would have even been a vote to authorize the use of force -- just as there's no vote today to invade North Korea, Iran, Cuba, or a host of regimes we rightfully despise.

I understand that as much as we might wish it, we can't rewind the tape of history. There is, as Robert Kennedy once said, 'enough blame to go around,' and I accept my share of the responsibility. But the mistakes of the past, no matter who made them, are no justification for marching ahead into a future of miscalculations and misjudgments and the loss of American lives with no end in sight. We each have a responsibility, to our country and our conscience, to be honest about where we should go from here. It is time for those of us who believe in a

better course to say so plainly and unequivocally.

Administration's Mistakes Have Narrowed Our Options:

We must begin by acknowledging that our options in Iraq today are not what they should be, or could have been.

The reason is simple. This Administration hitched their wagon to ideologues, excluding those who dared to tell the truth, even leaders of their own party and the uniformed military.

When after September 11th, flags flew from porches across America and foreign newspaper headlines proclaimed "We're all Americans now," the Administration could have kept the world united, but they chose not to. And they were wrong. Instead, they pushed allies away, isolated America, and lost leverage we desperately need today.

When they could have demanded and relied on accurate instead of manipulated intelligence, they chose not to. They were wrong – and instead they sacrificed our credibility at home and abroad.

When they could have given the inspectors time to discover whether Saddam Hussein actually had weapons of mass destruction, when they could have paid attention to Ambassador Wilson's report, they chose not to. And they were wrong. Instead they attacked him, and they attacked his wife to justify attacking Iraq. We don't know yet whether this will prove to be an indictable offense in a court of law, but for it, and for misleading a nation into war, they will be indicted in the high court of history. History will judge the invasion of Iraq one of the greatest foreign policy misadventures of all time.

But the mistakes were not limited to the decision to invade. They mounted, one upon another.

When they could have listened to General Shinseki and put in enough troops to maintain order, they chose not to. They were wrong. When they could have learned from George Herbert Walker Bush and built a genuine global coalition, they chose not to. They were wrong. When they could have implemented a detailed State Department plan for reconstructing post-Saddam Iraq, they chose not to. And they were wrong again. When they could have protected American forces by guarding Saddam Hussein's ammo dumps where there were weapons of individual destruction, they exposed our young men and women to the ammo that now maims

and kills them because they chose not to act. And they were wrong. When they could have imposed immediate order and structure in Baghdad after the fall of Saddam, Rumsfeld shrugged his shoulders, said Baghdad was safer than Washington, D.C. and chose not to act. He was wrong. When the Administration could have kept an Iraqi army selectively intact, they chose not to. They were wrong. When they could have kept an entire civil structure functioning to deliver basic services to Iraqi citizens, they chose not to. They were wrong. When they could have accepted the offers of the United Nations and individual countries to provide on the ground peacekeepers and reconstruction assistance, they chose not to. They were wrong. When they should have leveled with the American people that the insurgency had grown, they chose not to. Vice President Cheney even absurdly claimed that the "insurgency was in its last throes." He was wrong.

Bush Administration: The Real Cut and Run Republicans

Now after all these mistakes, the Administration accuses anyone who proposes a better course of wanting to cut and run. But we are in trouble today precisely because of a policy of cut and run. This administration made the wrong choice to cut and run from sound intelligence and good diplomacy; to cut and run from the best military advice; to cut and run from sensible war time planning; to cut and run from their responsibility to properly arm and protect our troops; to cut and run from history's lessons about the Middle East; to cut and run from common sense.

And still today they cut and run from the truth.

The Kerry Plan: The Path Forward

This difficult road traveled demands the unvarnished truth about the road ahead.

To those who suggest we should withdraw all troops immediately – I say No. A precipitous withdrawal would invite civil and regional chaos and endanger our own security. But to those who rely on the overly simplistic phrase "we will stay as long as it takes," who pretend this is primarily a war against Al Qaeda, and who offer halting, sporadic, diplomatic engagement, I also say – No, that will only lead us into a quagmire.

The way forward in Iraq is not to pull out precipitously or merely promise to stay "as long as it takes." To undermine the insurgency, we must instead simultaneously pursue both a political

settlement and the withdrawal of American combat forces linked to specific, responsible benchmarks. At the first benchmark, the completion of the December elections, we can start the process of reducing our forces by withdrawing 20,000 troops over the course of the holidays.

The Administration must immediately give Congress and the American people a detailed plan for the transfer of military and police responsibilities on a sector by sector basis to Iraqis so the majority of our combat forces can be withdrawn. No more shell games, no more false reports of progress, but specific and measurable goals.

It is true that our soldiers increasingly fight side by side with Iraqis willing to put their lives on the line for a better future. But history shows that guns alone do not end an insurgency. The real struggle in Iraq – Sunni versus Shiia – will only be settled by a political solution, and no political solution can be achieved when the antagonists can rely on the indefinite large scale presence of occupying American combat troops.

In fact, because we failed to take advantage of the momentum of our military victory, because we failed to deliver services and let Iraqis choose their leaders early on, our military presence in vast and visible numbers has become part of the problem, not the solution.

The Military Agrees:

And our generals understand this. General George Casey, our top military commander in Iraq, recently told Congress that our large military presence “feeds the notion of occupation” and “extends the amount of time that it will take for Iraqi security forces to become self-reliant.” And Richard Nixon’s Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, breaking a thirty year silence, writes, “Our presence is what feeds the insurgency, and our gradual withdrawal would feed the confidence and the ability of average Iraqis to stand up to the insurgency.” No wonder the Sovereignty Committee of the Iraqi Parliament is already asking for a timetable for withdrawal of our troops; without this, Iraqis believe Iraq will never be its own country.

We must move aggressively to reduce popular support for the insurgency fed by the perception of American occupation. **An open-ended declaration to stay ‘as long as it**

takes' lets Iraqi factions maneuver for their own political advantage by making us stay as long as they want, and it becomes an excuse for billions of American tax dollars to be sent to Iraq and siphoned off into the coffers of cronyism and corruption.

It will be hard for this Administration, but it is essential to acknowledge that the insurgency will not be defeated unless our troop levels are drawn down, starting immediately after successful elections in December. The draw down of troops should be tied not to an arbitrary timetable, but to a specific timetable for transfer of political and security responsibility to Iraqis and realignment of our troop deployment. That timetable must be real and strict. The goal should be to withdraw the bulk of American combat forces by the end of next year. If the Administration does its work correctly, that is achievable.

We Need A Political Solution:

Our strategy must achieve a political solution that deprives the Sunni-dominated insurgency of support by giving the Sunnis a stake in the future of their country. The Constitution, opposed by more than two thirds of Sunnis, has postponed and even exacerbated the fundamental crisis of Iraq. The Sunnis want a strong secular national government that fairly distributes oil revenues. Shiites want to control their own region and resources in a loosely united Islamic state. And Kurds simply want to be left alone. Until sufficient compromise is hammered out, a Sunni base can not be created that isolates the hard core Baathists and jihaadists and defuses the insurgency.

We Need a Regional Security Agreement:

The Administration must bring to the table the full weight of all of Iraq's Sunni neighbors. They also have a large stake in a stable Iraq. Instead of just telling us that Iraq is falling apart, as the Saudi foreign minister did recently, they must do their part to put it back together. We've proven ourselves to be a strong ally to many nations in the region. Now it's their turn to do their part.

The administration must immediately call a conference of Iraq's neighbors, Britain, Turkey and other key NATO allies, and Russia. All of these countries have influence and ties to various parties in Iraq. Together, we must implement a collective strategy to bring the parties in Iraq to a sustainable political compromise. This must include obtaining mutual security guarantees

among Iraqis themselves. Shiite and Kurdish leaders need to make a commitment not to perpetrate a bloodbath against Sunnis in the post-election period. In turn, Sunni leaders must end support for the insurgents, including those who are targeting Shiites. And the Kurds must explicitly commit themselves not to declare independence.

To enlist the support of Iraq's Sunni neighbors, we should commit to a new regional security structure that strengthens the security of the countries in the region and the wider community of nations. This requires a phased process including improved security assistance programs, joint exercises, and participation by countries both outside and within the Middle East.

Improve Training:

Simultaneously, the President needs to put the training of Iraqi security forces on a six month wartime footing and ensure that the Iraqi government has the budget to deploy them. The Administration must stop using the requirement that troops be trained in-country as an excuse for refusing offers made by Egypt, Jordan, France and Germany to do more.

Win the Real War on Terror:

We will never be as safe as we should be if Iraq continues to distract us from the most important war we must win – the war on Osama Bin Laden, Al Queda, and the terrorists that are resurfacing even in Afghanistan. These are the make or break months for Iraq. The President must take a new course, and hold Iraqis accountable. If the President still refuses, Congress must insist on a change in policy. If we do take these steps, there is no reason this difficult process can not be completed in 12-15 months. There is no reason Iraq cannot be sufficiently stable, no reason the majority of our combat troops can't soon be on their way home, and no reason we can't take on a new role in Iraq, as an ally not an occupier, training Iraqis to defend themselves. Only then will we have provided leadership equal to our soldiers' sacrifice – and that is what they deserve."

Paid for by Friends of John Kerry, Inc.