

Chris Dodd for President

Speech: Understanding the Stakes: The Way Forward in Iraq

Remarks By

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At Providence College

October 12, 2006

On the eve of the Second World War, the 20th century's most daunting and difficult struggle, Winston Churchill explained that "there is no worse mistake in public leadership than to hold out false hopes soon to be swept away....People can face peril or misfortune with fortitude and buoyancy, but they bitterly resent being deceived or finding that those responsible for their affairs are themselves dwelling in a fool's paradise."

I do not believe that in 2006 it is too late to heed Churchill's words. It is not too late to speak honestly about the challenge of Iraq, its implications for our national security, and the crucial effort to defeat global terrorism.

During the next 30 minutes or so, I want to offer my candid assessment about where America's Iraq policies have failed, and what I believe our nation must do to start the serious work of fixing them.

I have intentionally returned to this institution, where both my father and I received our undergraduate degrees, to share these thoughts with you today.

My father knocked on the doors of what was then a relatively small Dominican college and asked for the chance of a college education. The year was 1925. He had no means of paying tuition. But he promised that, if given a chance for a degree, he would find a way to pay for it some day.

Thomas Dodd graduated from Providence College in 1929, went on to Yale Law School, the FBI, the Justice Department, the Nuremberg trials, the United States House of Representatives, and the United States Senate.

My father never forgot the chance that this college took on an impoverished young man who had big dreams for himself and his country.

Twenty-seven years later, he took great pleasure that one of his six children would come here for a college education. Despite the Herculean efforts of a wonderful faculty and administration, I did not achieve academic excellence.

Yet, despite what some may surmise, and like my father before me, I did leave here

with a deep sense of idealism, values, and commitment that have sustained and motivated my 40-year life in public service – from my service in the Peace Corps through 8 elections and 32 years in the Congress.

It is important for me to publicly acknowledge this institution's contributions to my life. And it is equally important for you to know how grateful I am.

Now to the matter at hand: Iraq.

Before the United States invasion of Iraq, we knew that Islamist radicals were seeking to infect the Middle East and Muslim communities around the globe with their toxic, distorted, and hate-filled ideology. The 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, and later attacks on U.S. targets in Africa and the Middle East – these were but a prelude to the events of September 11th, 2001.

Indeed, we know that, barely a month before 9/11, the President of the United States was presented with a brief telling him in no uncertain terms that Osama Bin Laden and al Qaeda were determined to strike the United States.

Any illusions to the contrary vanished on September 11th.

Since that day, America has witnessed 5 years of tough talk from the White House; a proclamation of a global war on terror; five years of war in Afghanistan; and more than three years of war in Iraq.

Could we possibly be worse off today? Regrettably, the answer is yes, we are. The President's own intelligence experts tell us that the terrorist threat is greater today than it was on September 11, 2001.

We've arrived at this moment with a series of misplaced priorities and wrongheaded decisions that has been almost mathematically perfect in its consistency. The projects of Iraq, Afghanistan, and the war on terror are all tainted with the litany of one bad choice after another.

Had we known before the war what we know today – that there were no weapons of mass destruction; that there were no links between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda; that there was no imminent threat from Iraq to America's security or vital interests – Congress would never have considered, let alone voted to authorize, the use of force in Iraq.

And had we never entered Iraq, I believe America would be safer today. Yet, despite the failures leading up to the invasion of Iraq and since that invasion commenced, I still believe that if we promptly change course in Iraq, we can make America more secure.

Recently, a very important government intelligence report was made public, with some chilling judgments about looming terrorist threats.

The collective finding of the sixteen US intelligence agencies is that the Islamic world is

growing more radical—not despite, but because of the continuing war in Iraq. Iraq, they conclude, has become both a physical and an ideological training ground for the next generation of terrorists. In their words, Iraq is “a cause celebre for jihadists, breeding a deep resentment for US involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement.”

I firmly believe that our increased vulnerability is a direct consequence of choices made by the Bush Administration and its supporters.

The President has chosen to take America to war twice.

The first war – against al Qaeda and the Taliban government of Afghanistan that has given it sanctuary – was a just war, in my view, a war of necessity, with widespread international support and logistical backing.

The second was a war of choice and a terrible, terrible mistake.

We all recall the immediate aftermath of 9/11: the civilized world standing shoulder to shoulder with America in its decision to destroy the al-Qaeda terrorist network and topple the Taliban regime. The United Nations Security Council gave our decision international legitimacy—even China and Russia voted aye. For the first time in its history, NATO invoked Article V, the common self-defense clause.

None of that was true for Iraq. The premise for that war was based on theories cooked up in the neoconservative salons of Washington; on falsehoods; and on deliberate misrepresentations at the highest levels of our government. The result was to create a false pretense for war.

Did those who were part of this blunder of historic proportions expect that the United States could invade a country under false pretenses and pay no price?

We did pay, and we are continuing to pay: not just in lives—which is the most tragic cost of this or any war—but also with our resources. And we have paid with something more: a loss to our credibility—which is the unique cost of this war.

Because of President Bush’s failures, our name commands less admiration and our word, less weight. These are not just injuries to our vanity, but direct blows to our ability to advance our vital national interests in a more secure and just world.

Despite the deaths of 2,700 of our fellow citizens and hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqis; despite 20,000 soldiers who have sustained injuries, many of them life-altering; despite \$300 billion lost and still counting—despite all of these costs and sacrifices, Iraq remains a broken, crippled, fractured society.

The Iraqi economy is in worse shape today than it was in March 2003: electric and water treatment capacity, oil production, access to clean water—are all below prewar levels.

When Iraq’s national museums were looted shortly after the fall of Baghdad, Secretary

Rumsfeld's response was "stuff happens."

"Stuff happens" is a pretty good indicator of how seriously this administration took the rebuilding of Iraq. And it's a pretty good indicator of how little this administration knew or cared about Iraq's history and culture, which are always central to establishing a stable civil society.

The Bush administration has spent \$14 billion training and equipping 300,000 Iraqi police and security forces.

Yet, today as I speak to you on this college campus, some 23 separate sectarian militias operate with impunity throughout Baghdad. Sectarian killings continue largely unabated— averaging scores of deaths a day. After more than three years of conflict, anywhere from 60 thousand to 400 thousand Iraqi civilians have lost their lives.

How can we expect the Iraqi people to put their faith in democracy, when democracy has given them this?

Democracy isn't only—in fact, it isn't even mostly—about elections for the sake of elections. Democracy is the acceptance of rights and obligations for everyone, a robust debate, a free press, an independent judiciary, and stable, effective institutions that serve the well-being of people.

Democracy is a constant struggle, individual and collective—a war of the best within us, against the worst. The hunger for freedom is universal, but the means of freedom are not—democracy only grows where it has adapted to the culture, the circumstances, and the times. The institutions from which it takes its life have to be accepted and respected and tended every day.

There is also no denying that the Iraq war has severely taxed our ability to respond to other threats to our security.

We are further away from stabilizing Afghanistan and dealing a mortal blow to our al-Qaeda and Taliban enemies.

In fact, drug traffickers and tribal warfare now threaten to destroy the fragile foundation of Afghanistan's nascent democracy—and the Taliban is stronger now than at any point since our invasion.

We now have seven times more troops in Iraq than in Afghanistan—and that's certainly one of the main reasons why Osama bin Laden is still at large.

North Korea, which just this week claimed to have tested a nuclear weapon, is a further example of our country's growing vulnerabilities because of this Administration's fixation on Iraq. While we have been bogged down in Iraq, North Korea has taken the chance to expand its nuclear arsenal five-fold.

Al-Qaeda, Afghanistan, North Korea—the conclusion is irrefutable: America is less safe because of our Iraq diversion.

That's why so many voices among our civilian and military leadership are calling upon the President to change course in Iraq.

We need to grapple head on with three critical areas that hold the key to Iraq's future: security, domestic and regional political engagement, and economic reconstruction.

First, security: We must continue recruiting and training forces that reflect Iraq's ethnic diversity, forces that are capable of neutralizing sectarian militias, and are able to restore and maintain domestic security.

The administration made a tactical mistake recently by announcing that US troops would remain in Iraq at the current force level—142,000 military personnel—for at least the next six months. That announcement sent a signal to Iraq's political leaders and Iraq's neighbors that they could yet again delay making tough choices about taking responsibility for Iraq's security and stability.

The hour has arrived when Iraq must assume the responsibility of policing itself. At great cost, the United States has given the Iraqi people the chance for a bright future. Now they must seize that opportunity. There is not a treasury deep enough or an army large enough to achieve this goal if the Iraqi people lack the will to achieve it for themselves.

We must begin immediately to reposition our troops from Baghdad, Fallujah, and other large urban centers to Kurdistan, where there is relative law and order, and where they would be more accepted; to other, less populated areas of Iraq, where their training of Iraqi forces can continue; and to border areas, where they can protect the territorial integrity of Iraq until Iraqi forces can do so themselves.

US forces should also be repositioned to military bases in Kuwait and Qatar where they could be available to protect our national security interests – and to Afghanistan, where we must redouble our efforts to capture bin Laden, dismantle al Qaeda, and neutralize the Taliban.

These movements must begin immediately, with the goal of completing them within the next 12 to 18 months.

We must change course—for the sake of the Iraqis, for the sake our troops, and for the sake of our nation's security interests in other countries and other regions.

No Iraqi army can ever meaningfully stand up when Iraq's political atmosphere remains poisonous and fractured.

Which leads me to my second point: domestic and regional political engagement.

Our commanding generals have rightly concluded that there is no military solution to Iraq's unfolding civil conflict. Only a political solution will save Iraq from becoming a failed state. And so, along with training Iraqi troops, we must tackle Iraq's political chaos—because political stability is the cornerstone to a prosperous Iraq.

Political engagement must come first and foremost from within Iraq.

It must come from Iraq's secular and religious leaders—leaders like Ayatollah al-Sistani. When Sistani criticized those who would have postponed elections; when he insisted that clerics stay out of politics; and when he urged his followers to vote and to forswear violence, he demonstrated that he could be a force for moderation and a friend of democracy. Iraqis need more leaders like him at the table, and the United States needs to encourage more acts of leadership by him and others.

Political engagement must also involve Iraq's neighbors, as well as regional and international organizations. The United States must not be reluctant to turn to international and regional mediators. And regional powers like Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan could be enormously helpful in this effort.

We must be as willing to wage diplomacy as we have been to wage war in order to protect our vital security interests. Robust, muscular negotiations are not gifts to your enemies. They are essential tools for avoiding conflict and securing the peace.

We are reminded of the eloquence of John F. Kennedy, who said: "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate." Or, if you prefer, the words attributed to that famous movie *Mafioso*, Michael Corleone: "Keep your friends close – and your enemies closer."

To some extent, dialogue is already ongoing at the regional level: The ninth gathering of Iraq's neighbors took place in July in Tehran, and called for the "establishment of a broad-based Government with the participation of all segments" of Iraqi society.

Preparations are also underway, under the auspices of the Arab League, to convene an international conference on Iraq. But there is a lack of urgency to most of these efforts. That must change. And the US should lead.

A third and final element to success or failure in Iraq is the economy.

The Iraqi government has formally requested help from the United Nations to develop an International Compact for Iraq. This compact could serve as a blueprint for a new partnership with the international community, one aimed at consolidating peace and pursuing political, social and economic development over the next five years.

There are no guarantees. Iraq is broken. The policies of the Bush Administration have failed. That is clear. But there is a way forward in Iraq if we are honest enough, tough enough, and bold enough in our thinking and in our actions.

If we take these steps – repositioning our troops, encouraging political engagement within Iraq and among the regional and international community, and creating economic opportunity in that shattered country – we can serve our larger interests in peace, prosperity and security – not only for Iraqis, but more importantly for ourselves.

As members of this college, and as citizens of the United States, you don't have the power to necessarily move armies. But you do have the power to move the debate in our country—away from empty slogans, away from false, failed optimism, and toward an honest reckoning with the work we have to do.

If you are informed, if you have the truth on your side, I believe America will listen.

So study a foreign language, read the international press, travel abroad. Join the Peace Corps. Vote. Make yourselves the kind of informed, critical citizens that Washington will have no choice but to hear. And above all, hold your leaders accountable. If they speak in glittering generalities—call them on it. If they use words to obscure rather than make clear—call them on it. If they soft-peddle the difficulties we face or the sacrifices we need—call them on that, too.

Our country needs your voice and your intelligence; and while your civic engagement won't bring an end to all our problems, they can be the beginning of the solutions. So when your sons and daughters ask you what you did at the outset of the 21st century to make America safer, stronger, a more just and prosperous nation, I want each one of you to be able to say, at the very least—"I told the truth, and demanded nothing less."

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