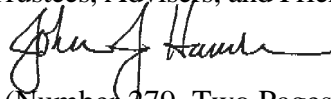


CSIS MEMORANDUM

To: CSIS Board of Trustees, Advisers, and Friends

From: John J. Hamre



Date: August 5, 2008 (Number 279. Two Pages)

Re: **The “longer term” in Iraq**

I was startled. Last week I met with an old friend, a retired four-star Army general who had just returned from 10 days in Iraq. My friend is one of the mentors/advisers who helped General Petraeus develop a new strategy for Iraq, a strategy that included the so-called “surge” of additional American forces. He is no dewy-eyed romantic, but instead a tough pragmatist. He saw us losing the war in Iraq and stepped in to help develop a new strategy. In our conversation he said “I think the progress we have made is now irreversible.” Irreversible. I repeated it and he said “yes”.

This is a startling change from the situation only a year ago. I spent 10 days in Iraq last summer and every day we were mortared in the green zone. We wore body armor and helmets everywhere, including inside the green zone. One year later we are concluding the success is irreversible, and that we can now accelerate the withdrawal of troops.

This news is now widespread in Washington. The atmosphere in the Pentagon is significantly changed. After five difficult, depressing years of deteriorating conditions, the prospect is now positive.

There are multiple causes for this positive trajectory. Certainly adding 40,000 more American soldiers and Marines (and we shouldn't forget Air Force and Navy personnel also working in Iraq) made a significant difference. But perhaps even more important was the change in our strategy, when we sought to enlist the support of Sunni tribal leaders. For the first four years we treated them as hostile forces sheltering “dead enders” left over from the Saddam government. We tried to build a model democracy in Baghdad so that it would take control of the country. But 18 months back we changed strategies. We started to work with local Sunni sheikhs as part of the solution, not part of the problem. And the sheikhs, tired of the violence and disgusted with the tactics of radical al Qaeda-types, decided to cooperate. We started to treat their militia forces as our friends. Now 80,000 Sunni militiamen are on our payroll. Instead of fighting us, they are helping us (for a price).

This, of course, sent a powerful signal to Shia militias. In the long-run, the Shia are more worried about Sunni militias than they are U.S. forces. Two years ago the U.S. military was fighting Sunni militias every day. With the Sunni militias helping us, the Shia soon realized that if they didn't cool it, we would turn all our energies on them, weakening them while their long-term opponents got stronger on our payroll. So the Shia militias pulled back.

This change in strategy had an astounding impact. Combined with the addition of U.S. forces it turned the tide, and now we have progress that is considered irreversible. It also should be noted that we are seeing a much more competent and effective Iraqi Army and police force, thanks to years of hard work by our trainers.

Washington is a town of politics, and politics is preoccupied with the unstated motives of political opponents. Almost every time I talk with people about the progress in Iraq, someone asks if President Bush plans an “October surprise” to swing the election by announcing a major troop withdrawal from Iraq.

I do know that there is serious planning underway for a major drawdown of U.S. forces this winter and into the next year. In my view it has nothing to do with our election this fall. I know from numerous conversations with senior leaders in the Pentagon that progress in Iraq is considered the best gift they can give the next president, no matter who is elected. America was being torn apart a year ago over our direction in Iraq. The fact that the situation on the ground has improved so much now that we can consider significant reductions in troop levels should be seen as a very welcome development for both of our candidates.

Progress in Iraq will strengthen our position throughout the Persian Gulf region, will reassure allies that we are not going to abandon a difficult situation, and give us much greater flexibility to deal with Iran. We have paid an astounding price for this outcome, but the benefits of this improved situation will substantially help whoever is our next President.

We are going to pull out substantial numbers of troops during the winter and into the spring, I am confident. And it is a good thing. We can now focus on Afghanistan where the situation is less optimistic.

I always welcome your feedback. Please drop me a note at JHamre@csis.org.

END