

## A Catholic Social Action Leader's Reflections on the War in Iraq, The Surge and the Role of People of Faith

President George W. Bush's strategy for Iraq, "a new way forward," represents a shift in policy that includes the deployment of 20,000 additional troops, the expenditure of more than \$1 billion in economic aid, the encouragement of friendly Mideast countries to also provide aid, and the establishment of benchmarks for the Maliki government to show that real progress is being made in stabilizing the country. The proposed surge or escalation in troops poses new challenges for the U.S. military, the administration, and the prime minister. It is an opportune time to reflect upon the current status and direction of the war and to assess the proper role of people of faith in the policy debates to come.

This short paper is intended to offer some pertinent statistics regarding the war, a political context for the current debate, some relevant Church teaching on the matter and a sampling of the moral questions in which policy decisions might be measured. Our hope is to cause a civil dialogue among Catholic laity about the issues, costs, challenges, and moral questions that confront our nation in light of this new policy shift. It is the role and responsibility of the laity to become informed and active in one of the most preeminent moral issues of our time.

The most recent statement of the U.S. Bishops on Iraq was made by Bishop William Skylstad on November 13, 2006. The statement entitled, "Call for Dialogue and Action on Responsible Transition in Iraq", reiterated the fact that the Holy See and the Bishops' Conference had repeatedly expressed "grave moral concerns about military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of invasion and occupation." According to the Bishops, "The Holy See and our Conference now support broad and necessary international engagement to promote stability and reconstruction in Iraq. Therefore, our nation cannot just look back. The complex situation in Iraq demands that our nation look around at what we face now and look ahead to what we can do in the future. The intervention in Iraq has brought additional moral responsibilities to help Iraqis to secure and rebuild their country. Our nation's military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as their presence contributes to a responsible transition. Our nation should look for effective ways to end their deployment at the earliest opportunity consistent with this goal."

“Basic benchmarks for a responsible transition in Iraq include: fostering adequate levels of security; curbing wanton killings, indefensible terrorist attacks and sectarian violence; strengthening the basic rule of law; promoting economic reconstruction to begin to create employment and economic opportunity for Iraqis; and supporting the further development of political structures and solutions that advance stability, political participation, and respect for religious freedom and basic human rights. Ultimately, this work must be done by Iraqis, but the United States and its coalition partners have a moral obligation to continue and intensify efforts with Iraqis, other countries in the region and the international community toward achieving these benchmarks. In particular, we urge Arab nations and the countries of Western Europe to take concrete steps against terror and to seek stability in the region. In addition, the future of Iraq and the whole region would be improved by our nation’s concerted leadership to resolve, in concert with the international community, other conflicts in the region, especially by pursuing a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians.” (November 13, 2006 statement of Bishop William Skylstad, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, entitled “Call for Dialogue and Action on Responsible Transition in Iraq.”)

According to the Associated Press, as of January 9, 2007, there have been 3,014 U.S. military casualties in Iraq since the war began on March 19, 2003. 22,834 Americans have been wounded. December was the third deadliest month of the war with 111 military fatalities.

According to the Iraqi Health Ministry, 22,950 Iraqi civilians and police officers were killed in 2006.

The Iraqi Body Count estimates total civilian deaths since the outbreak of the war at between 53,040 and 58,643. The Associated Press estimates that 2,180 Iraqis were killed in December, the worst month for civilian deaths of the previous 20.

An estimated 1.6 million Iraqis have fled from their homes but remain in Iraq, while another 1.8 million Iraqis are refugees in other countries.

The U.S. Congress has appropriated more than \$500 billion for Iraq, Afghanistan and other anti-terrorist operations since 2001. The Pentagon is

expected to request approximately \$100 billion in additional military aid for Iraq and Afghanistan above what was requested in September.

On Wednesday, January 10, 2007, President George W. Bush announced a new policy for Iraq. The President called for a “surge” of up to 20,000 additional troops into Iraq, more economic assistance for infrastructure development, as well as, accelerated training for the Iraqi military. The strategy has been summarized as one of surging, clearing, holding (key neighborhoods) and building.

The unveiling of this new strategy follows major changes in the top military command, including the replacement of General George Casey and General John Abizaid. General Casey recently told the New York Times: “The longer we in the U.S. forces continue to bear the main burden of Iraq’s security, it lengthens the time that the government of Iraq has to take the hard decisions about reconciliation and dealing with the militias. And the other thing is that they can continue to blame us for all of Iraq’s problems, which are at base their problems.”

An assessment of the Iraq Study Group is that the democratically elected government of Iraq “is not adequately advancing national reconciliation, providing basic security or delivering essential services. The level of the violence is high and growing.” The study report indicates that the ability of the U.S. to influence events in Iraq is diminishing. “Many Iraqis are embracing sectarian identities. The lack of security impedes economic development. Most countries in the region are not playing a constructive role in support of Iraq and some are undercutting security.” The study group views Iraq as “a centerpiece of American foreign policy” that influences how America is viewed in the region and around the world. This is one of the United States’ most significant international challenges in decades. According to the report, “The United States has both a national and moral interest in doing what it can to give Iraqis an opportunity to avert anarchy.”

In a January 8, 2007 piece in the Washington Post, Jackson Diehl writes: “Now Bush is likely to bet that the dispatch of additional American forces will somehow produce a breakthrough in Bagdad before 2008. That parallels the Iraq Study Group, which foresees a transition of the war to full Iraqi control and withdrawal of all U.S. combat forces by the first quarter of 2008, and Democratic plans for the beginning of a troop drawdown in four to six months.”

Meanwhile, Democratic Congressional leaders are preparing to strongly resist the President's surge strategy by scheduling a Congressional vote on the policy, threatening to cut off funding for the war, as well as, providing policy oversight through Congressional hearings. Senator Joe Biden has consistently argued that the current situation ultimately calls for a political rather a military solution.

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell has voiced doubt that a surge in troops would succeed. In addition, Republican Senator and Vietnam Veteran Chuck Hagel called the escalation plan, "Alice in Wonderland." Hagel said: "I'm absolutely opposed to sending any more troops to Iraq. It is folly." Other voices include Senator John McCain, who is viewed as a leading advocate for escalation. He recently said: "This may not be our last chance, but it's as close to our last chance as anything I can think of."

This all comes at a time in which the public is increasingly skeptical about whether the war can be won. A USA Today/Gallup Poll that was conducted the weekend of January 5th found that an increase in troop levels was opposed by a margin of 61% - 36%. That same poll found only one of four Americans approves of the President's handling of Iraq. The opinion pages of major newspapers have also been highly critical of the President's new policy shift.

The current status of the war in Iraq and the probability of an escalation in troop levels pose several moral questions worthy of reflection for the Catholic laity. Such questions include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Does just cause exist for this planned strategy?
- Have all diplomatic and political alternatives been exhausted?
- Are there plans to engage other Arab countries in a solution to the war?
- Is there a commitment to resolve other conflicts in the region, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian crisis?
- Is there a probability of success?
- Is there an adequate plan for a responsible transition?
- Is there a reasonable chance that the prime minister and his cabinet can adequately govern, focus on political accountability and justice for all segments of the Iraqi population, stabilize the sectarian violence and avoid a deepening of what some perceive as a civil war?

- What are the specific plans for economic reconstruction?
- Does the strategy meet the test of proportionality? (This means that the costs that will be incurred and the damage inflicted must be proportional to the good expected).
- Can the safety of our dedicated and courageous men and women who serve in the U.S. military be protected and ensured?
- Can civilian populations be adequately protected?

As people of faith, let us pray daily for the safety of those who honorably serve our nation and for their families. Our prayers should also be offered for the suffering Iraqi people that their basic needs be met and that they may live in dignity and peace and without fear and devastation. And, finally, may we offer prayers for the leaders of our nation and the world that they may pursue dialogue and diplomatic solutions that result in justice and a lasting peace in Iraq and throughout the region.

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