

GREAT DECISIONS

GDTV 2008 Extended Interview

Lee Hamilton

Former Co-Chair, Iraq Study Group

On exiting Iraq...

I do not favor a rigid date saying that we will be out by such and such a date or even a rigid schedule for withdrawal. I do favor a responsible exit from Iraq that has to be done carefully, calibrated, gradual over a period of time. But there should be a very clear U.S. policy for a responsible exit from Iraq.

You can define responsible in different ways, but I think the primary thrust of our recommendations in many respects was that we should have a responsible exit from Iraq. Among other things, that includes the mission of forces has to shift to training Iraqis. It means that the Iraqi government has to take over a lot more responsibility than it thus far has. And it means that we have to initiate a very robust diplomatic offensive. All of these things have to be going on at the same time to have a responsible exit.

On training Iraqi forces...

Everybody agrees that the mission of U.S. forces at some point, the primary mission, should turn to training Iraqi forces. That was a principal recommendation of the Iraq Study Group. It is quite clear that has not been our primary mission. Our primary mission has been the surge, and that continues to be the primary mission of U.S. forces. We believed on the Iraq Study Group that if you are going to get out of Iraq you are going to have to train the Iraqi forces much better than we have been able to do over the last several years. We have not trained effectively Iraqi forces.

Has there been some improvement? I think the answer to that is yes, particularly in the last year. Is it satisfactory or sufficient? I don't think it's close to it. The Iraqi forces are not performing as well as we'd like to see them perform. We've got a lot of work to do at that point.

On the surge...

The surge, the primary purpose of the surge, was to create a breathing space so that the Iraqi politicians could put it together and you would develop and effective Iraqi government. That clearly has not happened.

On Iraqi political leadership...

The way forward is to have the Iraqi government step up to its responsibilities, which it has not done. The real question that lingers in my mind in talking to Iraqi leaders is, are they Iraqi leaders, or are they sectarian leaders? And I must say that the evidence has been pretty strong that they are sectarian and not Iraqi leaders.

The question, I think, at this point is if they are capable of becoming Iraqi leaders and bringing the country together, whether they have the political will to do it or whether they are jockeying for sectarian position within the country.

On pressing the Maliki government...

My own impression is that there are a lot of things that could be done to increase the pressure, if you would, on the Iraqi leaders. The president of the United States needs to make it very clear. Mr. Maliki, you have got to perform not in some distant future, you've got to perform immediately. And if you do not, we're coming out. That's real pressure and it has not been applied.

You can have all kinds of benchmarks, which have now been enacted into law, that the Iraqi government must do, must perform, by a certain date. Those are a point of leverage and I think can be effective. I think we should sit down and negotiate with the Iraqi government now, a status of forces agreement, which would include, among other things, redeployments and draw downs. That would be real leverage on the Iraqi government.

I think the pressure can come from a variety of sources. It should certainly come from the president of the United States. To the extent the Congress can get their act together, which they have yet to do, it could come from the Congress.

But not just American pressure. It should come from the neighbors in the region. They've not been helpful here at all. They've been jockey for some kind of position in Iraq, but they have really not come together and tried to help Iraq become a stable society.

But not just the neighbors. The pressure should come from the international community, from the United Nations, from the European community, from all of the industrialized world. This is what we mean by robust diplomatic offensive.

On the tools of American power...

You cannot solve the problem of Iraq with a military approach. You cannot solve the problem of Iraq with an economic approach. You cannot solve it with a political approach. The key to success in Iraq is the integration of all of the tools of American power, and it has to be very skillfully put together. Military, political, diplomatic, all kinds of tools in order to be effective.

Our problem has been that we see the world of Iraq through a military prism, sometimes other perspectives through an economic approach or through a political approach. None of them work by themselves. You have to integrate all of the tools of power.

On the diplomatic offensive...

I think there are some encouraging steps, modest steps I must say. It looks as if the French are no longer standing back and criticizing but wanting to try to help. That's a modest step forward, good rhetoric, I have not seen much action yet, although the French foreign minister did visit the country.

The UN has been on the sidelines in Baghdad, partly because of our fault, partly because of the UN's fault. For example, we were told repeatedly that the most important politician in Iraq is the Ayatollah Sistani. Not religious leader. Politician. We don't talk to him. Not entirely our fault, but we don't talk to him. The UN can talk to him. We've not used that avenue as we should. Here's the most important figure, we're told over and over again, by the Iraqi government, and we have no contact with him. That has to be part of the diplomatic offensive.

Likewise with al-Sadr, surely one of the most important leaders in Iraq. We don't talk to him. How do you solve these problems in Iraq if you do not talk with the principle leaders in Iraq? We talk to some of them, we don't talk to all of them. That's part of the diplomatic offensive, but it is much, much more than that.

Part of it is our bilateral relations with Iraq, which I talked about a moment ago, and the necessity of putting pressure of Maliki. Putting real pressure on him, not just slapping him on the back and telling him he's doing a good job.

Part of it is bringing together the neighbors and saying ok folks, you've been sitting on the sidelines now for a long time, criticizing what's going on in Iraq, criticizing us, now let's do something about it. It is not in your interest to have chaos in Iraq. You have to understand that you, your country, is threatened by a chaotic Iraq. They are beginning to understand that, but they have not yet come together.

We have to be the catalyst, the United States, to bring those people together. Likewise in the international community – things are not going to happen diplomatically unless

the United States takes the lead, and we have not. Or if we have it has been very halting.

On Iran...

I think Iran is part of the problem in Iraq. A big part of the problem. To me that means they have to be part of the solution as well. I don't think it's possible to say ok, we're going to sit down with our friends, the Saudis, and we're going to sit down with our friends the Jordanians and solve the problems of Iraq.

In the best of all worlds maybe that would work out, but you can't leave out some of our adversaries. Iran is a major player in Iraq. We may not like that, but it's a fact. And if you are going to deal with Iraq and try to bring it together as a country you cannot ignore the power, the presence, the influence of Iran.

I do not for a moment suggest that dealing with Iran is easy. I think it's going to be very, very difficult.

On a unified Iraq policy...

My perspective on this is that Iraq is a major, perhaps the major, political challenge we have to our system of government right now, and we've got to try to solve it. You cannot solve it if you cannot bring the country together more than our political leadership has been able to do. You have to have a unity of effort.

The president can talk about victory, victory, victory, if that's what he wants. The Congress can talk about withdrawal by a certain deadline, that's what many of them want to do. They can each go their way, merrily along the way. But you do not get an effective American foreign policy unless you get unity of effort. The president cannot have everything he wants. The congress cannot get everything they want to have an effective policy in Iraq. You have to have unity. And we have not had it.

This is fundamentally a failure of American political leadership. If you are a Democrat you can blame the Republicans, if you are a Republican you can blame the Democrats, and each can make a pretty good case. But the fact of the matter is the country is not unified with regard to Iraqi policy and furthermore, the fact is, that there hasn't been very much effort to get that unity. Everybody is dug in to their trenches on their positions and as a result, the policy has been much, much less effective than it otherwise would be.

#

