

On July 12 the President issued a report as required by the fiscal year 2007 Supplemental Appropriations bill assessing the progress of the sovereign government of Iraq's performance in achieving the benchmarks detailed in the bill. As we know, this report told us that 8 of the 18 benchmarks detailed in that bill received satisfactory marks. While we are certainly disappointed that more benchmarks were not achieved, it is important to highlight the success that is being made, and how the Iraqi government is performing, as their success will ultimately allow us to responsibly reduce our troop levels.

Specifically, the government of Iraq has made progress in forming a Constitutional Review Committee to review the constitution. This is important, just like in our Nation's history; we needed to create a constitution that provided a standard for which to base our laws. Though many contentious issues continue to exist, I am pleased that significant progress is being made. If Iraq cannot form their constitution, then it will be very difficult or impossible to move forward onto other matters.

Also, the Iraqis have satisfied the requirements set forth to enact and implement legislation forming semi-autonomous regions. This law is set to come into effect in 18 months, but thus far this potentially very contentious issue has not received much attention. This is important as it further organizes and equips Iraq to take on the responsibilities of a democratic government and this benchmark furthers the necessary groundwork needed to build a responsible and legitimate government.

Iraq has made progress to ensure the rights of minor political parties within the legislature and maintain that their rights are protected. Clearly this is important in obtaining legitimacy, particularly given the historical and present conflicts between the Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds.

On the security front, the Iraqis, with coalition support, have successfully reached benchmarks establishing joint security stations across Baghdad that provide a continuous security presence. These stations are necessary as they can effectively combine American technology and capabilities with the Iraqi presence on the ground in order to counter insurgent threats where they begin. By mid-June, 32 joint security stations have reached initial operational capability and 36 combat outposts have reached initial or full capacity.

Also, the goal of providing three trained and ready Iraqi brigades in support of Baghdad operations has been achieved and this complements the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group. Certainly this is a major priority as the development of a functional and effective Iraqi fighting and security force is absolutely essential for the Iraqis to further take the reins

of their government, and I am pleased that these goals are being accomplished thus far.

At the beginning of this year, the President changed the focus of this effort. Decisions were made for a new direction. ADM William Fallon was placed in charge as CENTCOM commander and the Senate unanimously confirmed GEN David Petraeus as the new commander of our forces in Iraq. The much talked about, and much criticized, surge of 28,000 additional troops has only been underway for just about 3 weeks now.

Operation Phantom Thunder began on June 15 and already Iraq, and particularly Baghdad, is a much different place than it was only 6 months ago. U.S. forces have begun working closely with Iraqis to bring down sectarian violence of al-Qaida in country. So far the new counterinsurgency has decreased Shiite death squad activity and many militia leaders have been disposed of. Execution levels are at the lowest point in a year, and al-Qaida hotspots in the city are shrinking and becoming isolated from one another and supply lines are being cut around the city.

For the first time in years the U.S. is operating freely in eastern Baghdad as we are surrounding the villages and small towns around Baghdad routing out insurgent bases. Already, total car bombings and suicide attacks are down in May and June, and by the end of June, American troops controlled about 42 percent of the city's neighborhoods, up from 19 percent in April.

Initial military success certainly does not mean that operations are complete, nor is political victory guaranteed. The fact remains that this body unanimously confirmed GEN Petraeus with the knowledge that he planned to initiate this surge that would ideally route out al-Qaida and ultimately clear the path for internal change within Iraq. Again, the surge began on June 15 and we owe it to our troops who are placing their lives on the line not to pull the plug on them while they remain in harm's way.

Our best and brightest military minds have worked to construct this new strategy and we need to see it through. I would like to see our troops come home today, but the harsh reality remains that this is not a valid option, will not make us safer, and is not in our national interest. If we leave, it is naïve to think al-Qaida and our enemies will just go away and we will no longer be threatened.

Additionally, I have heard many of my colleagues discuss on the floor some of their new strategies in Iraq, strategies that I believe would weaken us at home and abroad. What I find curious is that they keep referring to finding a bipartisan resolution in Iraq, when only months ago this body overwhelmingly approved 2 new military commanders in the region and a new diplomatic leader in Ambassador Crocker. We also approved, in a bipar-

tisan manner, the new way forward in Iraq that President Bush eloquently defended this morning. In that vote, this body committed that we would allow the surge to go forward and would give GEN Petraeus the time to enact the strategy. I cannot in good conscience cut short a plan barely 3 months old.

As we all know, in September a complete review of Iraq policy, including a detailed assessment of the surge will be presented. I look forward to that assessment. I look forward to making the appropriate decisions based on that report. It would be disingenuous to simply discontinue the plans that our military leaders have planned and are putting into place simply for political gains.

Remarkably, the Senate is in a similar situation that we were only months ago when many in this body wanted to reject the strategy GEN Petraeus proposed in Iraq, even before he has been given the full opportunity to perform his mission. Well, we are at it again. For what reason did my colleagues agree to the new strategy in Iraq but are not willing to support our own self-imposed guidelines? I don't know the answer to that, but I do know that I will not. I will continue to vote against any legislation that sets arbitrary deadlines and thresholds in Iraq—and plead with my colleagues to do the same.

Let's not stand here this week and prejudge what will come out of the September 15 report, but more importantly, let's not prejudge the talents of our men and women in Iraq. Let's give our military and diplomatic teams the time they deserve, and which we had promised them.

I yield the floor. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. LEVIN. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2008

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of H.R. 1585, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 1585) to authorize appropriations for fiscal year 2008 for military activities of the Department of Defense, for military construction, and for defense activities of the Department of Energy, to prescribe military personnel strengths for such fiscal year, and for other purposes.