Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

**"An Oversight Hearing on the Planning and Conduct of the War in Iraq:
When Will Iraqi Security Forces Be Able to 'Stand Up,' So American Troops
Can Begin to 'Stand Down'?"**

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October 12, 2006

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, and distinguished members. My name is Nathaniel Fick.
I served as a Marine Corps infantry officer in Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002, and in Iraq in 2003.
After leaving active duty as a Captain, I'm now in graduate school in Boston.

I'm here today as neither a Democrat nor a Republican, but as a citizen and a veteran.
My message is urgency. Urgency because 776 Americans were wounded, and 72 were killed, in
Iraq in September, following record high Iraqi casualties earlier this summer. Urgency because
the consequences of losing in Iraq are staggering, and our finite window of opportunity to make
progress is slamming shut. Urgency because the American people have not been engaged in this
war, and we cannot succeed if the burden is borne by our military alone. The most shocking part
of serving in Iraq is coming home and realizing that most of the nation hardly knew we were
gone.

There are thousands of Soldiers and Marines whose experience in Iraq is more extensive
and more recent than mine. I can't speak for all of them, but I hope today to convey a few
lessons I've learned, lessons that have been echoed by nearly all of my comrades. We are not
strategists. We fought these wars in the dirt, where "winning" sometimes meant living to see the
next sunrise. I don't presume to recommend courses of action to you, but rather to highlight
three ideas — from a grunt's perspective — on which good decisions might be based.

***The American people have been given a false choice in Iraq, and we should recast the debate
in more honest and accurate terms.***

The options aren't simplistic soundbites: "stay the course," versus "cut and run." Our
real choices now involve how many troops to keep in Iraq, and what they should do while
they're there. My own experience sheds light on these questions.

In the Spring of 2003, my battalion fought exactly the people we expected to fight:
Ba'ath Party hardliners, foreign jihadists, and criminals. The battalion returned to Iraq a year
later to find that the enemy had changed: there was then a broad-based insurgency made up of

average people. Instead of Saddam loyalists or foreigners, many were pragmatic Iraqis who felt the U.S. had not lived up to its promises. A year later, on the battalion's third tour, the nature of the fight had changed again: American forces were on the sidelines — and occasionally in the middle — as vicious ethnic battles unfolded between groups of Iraqis. This latest iteration is particularly ironic: the American presence is a provocation that stokes much of the civil strife, and yet it's also the only thing keeping a lid on all-out civil war. These observations suggest that any large-scale withdrawal of American forces from Iraq today would end in genocidal bloodletting and the prospect of a failed state in the heart of the Middle East — a nightmare scenario.

On the other hand, my old platoon of Marines has done four combat deployments since 9/11, and is about to embark on its fifth. These men are volunteers. Most of them are married, and many have children. They, and the other members of our ground forces, are already operating at full capacity. The Marine Corps recognizes this, and recently announced a recall of 2,500 Marines from the Individual Ready Reserve. I might be one of them. These Marines will do their duty when called, but this is clearly a sign of desperation, and suggests that we cannot increase the U.S. footprint in Iraq without taking dire steps.

The conclusion I reach is that we must make better use of the forces we have. This isn't empty rhetoric. History points to two major lessons in waging war successfully against insurgents.

We must emphasize building over killing, and must tie our welfare to that of the Iraqis.

The defining phrases in Iraq today are our strategy of "Clear, Hold, Build," and the plan to "stand down as the Iraqis stand up." Both are fundamentally sound. The problem is that we're not implementing them, and never have.

"Clear, Hold, Build" is a valid framework. U.S. forces have the firepower and skill to clear any area in Iraq, but we don't have the manpower to hold with Americans alone, and we haven't been given the resources to build. The consequences of these shortages were painfully apparent to those of us on the ground as early as April 2003, when my platoon was routinely tasked to patrol sixty or eighty square kilometers of Baghdad. Our mission was to "show American presence, disarm the populace, distribute fresh water, provide medical care, map critical infrastructure, locate unexploded ordnance" and on and on. There were twenty-three of us. We always had plenty of ammunition, but frequently had no translator, and never had enough reconstruction money or aid supplies. I didn't see many ideologues in Iraq. I saw normal people who wanted the same things for their families that we want — electricity twenty-fours per day, basic healthcare, access to clean water, and safe neighborhoods. They were willing to side with whoever appeared most able to provide these basic goods, and we have consistently failed to prove that we're that side.

Our stated goal of "standing down as the Iraqis stand up" makes perfect sense. In the long term, Americans *will* leave, and Iraqis will have to solve Iraqi problems. In the short and medium term, this requires making the advisory mission in Iraq our main effort. The heart of this plan has been the creation of Military Transition Teams (MTTs) and Police Transition

Teams (PTTs), small groups of soldiers and Marines who live, eat, sleep, train, and fight with the Iraqi army and police battalions they advise. These teams embody all that is good about U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq: they emphasize intelligence, de-emphasize the use of force, and rely on civilian institutions to protect the population and build infrastructure. Unfortunately, they're our main effort in word only. In fact, only 1 in 30 Americans deployed to Iraq serves as an embedded advisor. They, not the Americans sequestered in fantasy-land Forward Operating Bases and the Green Zone, are our best hope, and we must train, fund, and prioritize them commensurately.

The burden of this war is being borne by the less than one percent of our population that has served in Iraq, and by their families.

This is morally corrupt, and strategically foolish. Iraq may or may not have been part of the Global War on Terrorism in 2003, but it is now, if for no other reason than we made it so. After September 11, 2001, our government advised its citizens to go shopping, telling us that any disruption to our way of life would hand a victory to our enemies. As a consequence, we have utterly failed to mobilize our population for what may be a Long War.

In fact, it often seems as if there is a concerted effort to keep the war and its sacrifices out of the daily lives of our citizens. My fellow Marines are confused when images of our friends' flag-draped caskets are kept off the evening news in a purported "show of respect" for the dead and their families. What is disrespectful about a military honor guard? Those images should be in every American living room, every night of this war. The purpose isn't to stoke patriotic fervor, and it isn't to bolster anti-war sentiment. We must do everything possible to narrow the gulf between those fighting this war and their counterparts at home.

I am no fan of a draft. But I cannot help noticing that college campuses, once hotbeds of activism, are now islands of apathy. This war simply doesn't touch most Americans. We can slap a yellow sticker on our SUVs, and never acknowledge the relationship between energy consumption and national security. We can declare that military service isn't for "our kind of people," and then wonder why our leaders seem to have so little experience in military matters.

The greatest danger of civic disengagement is that it threatens to undermine the very values we claim to fight for. I joined the Marines in 1998 because I believe that the United States stands for peace, liberty, and prosperity in the world, and that our ideals can serve as an example and a force for positive change. Whenever I took Marines into harm's way, I had to know two things: first, that what I was asking them to do was morally right, not in a political or strategic sense, but in our little slice of the war; and second, that, if anyone were killed, I would be able to stand in a living room months later and explain to a mother and father why their son had died working for me, and why I had thought that sacrifice was worthwhile. That sets the bar exceedingly high, and yet we cleared it every day. We cleared it because we knew what we stood for. Torture and indefinite imprisonment without trial are not about our enemies. They are about us. As a junior officer, I don't see how they can possibly meet the litmus test I've described, and I don't believe they're in keeping with the values of the United States and our military.

We will not, however, hear an outcry about any of this from the men and women in uniform. They are professional volunteers who swore an oath to obey the lawful orders of a democratically elected government. 140,000 of them are valiantly doing that in Iraq today. Leading them is a sacred trust, partly because they cannot publicly advocate for themselves. We simply can't afford to kick this can down the road past November, or past 2008. Too many people are dying, too much money is being squandered, and too much damage is being done to the United States' standing in the world. Our Soldiers and Marines are trained to have a bias for action. Indecision is a decision, and inaction has consequences all its own. You on this committee are in a position to act. I implore you to do so, and do it urgently. Thank you.