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Petraeus, Crocker Brief Congress on Iraq

Gen. David H. Petraeus, the U.S. Commander in Iraq, and Ryan C. Crocker, the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, faced questions before two Senate committees and two House committees during three Congressional hearings this week. It was extremely disappointing to hear them concede that the Bush Administration's planned strategy will remain largely unchanged and that they expect a major troop presence in Iraq for years to come.



General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker failed to substantiate any major progress provided by the troop surge. The surge was supposed to reduce violence enough to provide the battling Iraqi factions with time to work together to build a viable government capable of ensuring basic security and able to improve the everyday lives of the Iraqi people. Sadly, the greatest achievement highlighted this week was a promise by Iraqi leaders to talk more.

I'm very dissatisfied with President Bush's intention to stay the course in Iraq. He's ignoring the majority of Americans who rightly wish an end to this war. We need to immediately begin redeploying our troops. We need to be making major steps, not continuing a policy of small steps that lead nowhere.

At this point, the brave men and women of our armed forces have accomplished everything asked of them and they have completed all that is possible militarily in Iraq. There is an intractable problem on the ground in Iraq. The tensions between the sectarian groups are centuries old and our presence only exacerbates the hostilities. It is no longer a military problem, but one of politics and diplomacy.

It is clear that continued open-ended military action is not in the best interest of the United States of America, the Iraqi people or the Persian Gulf Region. We are beyond the point where we need to turn Iraq over to the Iraqis. All Iraqis must know that Iraq is free and that the U.S. will not be an occupying force.

Congress must work quickly in a bipartisan way to forge a new direction in Iraq that achieves a measure of stability in Iraq and shrinks the role of the American military. We must commit to ending this war and focus our Nation's efforts on fighting the real threats of terrorism around the world.

Congress Continues Focus on Education

Congress recently scored a major victory for education with passage of legislation that makes sweeping changes to the federal student aid programs.

The College Cost Reduction and Access Act (H.R. 2669) will boost college financial aid by roughly \$20 billion over the next five years. The legislation pays for itself by reducing excessive federal subsidies paid to lenders in the college loan industry. It also includes \$750 million in federal budget deficit reduction.

This is part of Congress' renewed commitment to a new generation of investment in education. It's vitally important because education provides the strong foundation our country is built upon. While this was a major victory, and there's still more that Congress can do to help make sure that all Americans have access to educational opportunity.

Congress should now move to reauthorize the Higher Education Act, expanding access to higher education and providing more stringent regulation on student loan providers. The Higher Education Act is the primary law governing colleges, universities and financial aid.



Halifax Community College

The Senate has already approved its version of the reauthorization bill (S. 1642). That bill includes language barring lenders from giving schools financial funds or other perks in exchange for steering loans toward them, and directs the U.S. Secretary of Education to examine ways to contain costs and track pricing trends. The bill would also put schools on notice about that the government would be monitoring tuition increases. It's an important blueprint that the House will likely use as it works to move this issue forward before the end of the year.

The House is also expected to take up reauthorization of the 2001 education law known as "No Child Left Behind (NCLB)." Teachers, students, parents and administrators have all expressed their concerns to me about shortcomings in NCLB, but the most common complaint is that while the law provided for higher standards it failed to fund the efforts needed to reach them. I strongly favor of increasing funding for NCLB programs that benefit low-income students and build a state's capacity to help turnaround low-performing schools.

The House Fiscal Year 2008 Appropriations bill (H.R. 3043) that funds education does include a \$2 billion, or 8.6%, increase over Fiscal Year 2007.



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