



United States Senator
Richard Shelby
REPORTS TO ALABAMA



A Challenge to Define a Generation

By: Senator Richard Shelby (R-AL)

The fight against terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism will define this generation, and perhaps generations to come. Our mission in Iraq is one of the most significant foreign policy challenges our generation will confront, and the cost of our continued presence in Iraq must be weighed against the achievability of our long term goal of bringing stability to the Middle East.

President Bush addressed the nation in January to outline the new way forward in Iraq – a strategy defined by a surge of 30,000 additional U.S. troops and continued emphasis on training the Iraqi military. The surge was specifically intended to stabilize Baghdad and other regions of intense insurgent presence. General Petraeus stated that by September, a full assessment of our military operations' progress would be conducted. While I believe that the best military strategy comes from the advice of our commanders, I felt it important to see, firsthand, our military operations in Iraq prior to General Petraeus' scheduled testimony.

On August 30, I met with General Petraeus, Ambassador Crocker, and top military commanders in Baghdad. I went to Iraq to see for myself the effects of the surge. What I learned was that we have made a great deal of progress and there are real, measurable results. Our civilian and military leadership pointed to a more secure capital region, improvement in the capability of the Iraqi Army, and the recent turning of Sunni tribes in al Anbar Province against al Qaeda. This latter occurrence is of particular significance, since al Qaeda is principally a Sunni terrorist organization.

Most importantly, while in Baghdad, I had the opportunity to meet with many of our brave servicemen and women, including several from Alabama. I continue to be in awe of our servicemembers whose dedication, commitment and professionalism are unrivaled. We have the finest military force ever to set foot on a battlefield. Their morale remains high, even in the face of diminishing support from back

home. Their courage and determination to succeed cannot be overstated.

While the surge has had tangible results in making several areas more secure, we must remember there are limits to what our military can do. I remain deeply concerned about the Iraqis' ability to meet their responsibilities. Although we have seen promising signs from the Iraqi government signaling their commitment to success, I firmly believe the Iraqi government must do more. Currently, there are approximately 300,000 local and provincial police, including 25,000 police officers. While these numbers seem significant, the national police force has struggled with sectarian problems from within, weakening the force as a whole. In addition to a police force, a capable Iraqi Army is vital to ensuring the country's ability to protect itself in the future. This includes having both a strong leadership willing to conduct combat missions against the insurgents and access to necessary military equipment and training. Further, as the country becomes more secure, the Iraqi government must take steps to develop Iraq's political and economic institutions and discard its sectarian biases in order to advance politically and govern in a unifying manner.

The end date of our direct involvement is not yet known, but there will be an end date. Strengthening the political, military and economic institutions that will allow Iraq to prosper and stand on its own is a fundamental prerequisite to redeploying our forces back to the United States. Ultimately, the future of Iraq lies with its government and with its people. However, whatever course our strategy in Iraq takes, it must never include abandoning our nation's principles or throwing away the sacrifices made by our armed forces. The end date should come not as the result of an arbitrary "exit strategy" but as the result of a stable and secure environment in Iraq where its political and economic structures have the opportunity to succeed.

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