

WASHINGTON DC, (2/13/07) - Rep. Steve Israel (D-NY), Member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, spoke today on the Iraq resolution. His remarks:

Mr. Speaker, I want to begin by setting the record straight. I have heard my friends on the other side talk about this resolution as calling for withdrawal, as calling for retreat. There is nothing in this resolution that says withdraw; there is nothing in this resolution that says retreat; there is nothing in this resolution that says exit.

What this resolution says is that we support our troops, and we do not believe that it is a good idea to add 20,000 more troops to a policy that has not worked.

In October of 2002, I voted to authorize the use of force in Iraq. I believed then, as I believe now, that the Middle East is a dangerous place and that you have to use a combination of hard power and soft power to help change the trajectory of the Middle East from a place that teaches kids how to blow things up to a place that teaches kids how to put things together.

In January of 2005, I visited our troops in Iraq, and I remember sitting with General Casey and asking him, How many foreign fighters are here and how many insurgents? And at that point, January 2005, the General said, Congressman, there are about 500 foreign fighters and there are about 5,000 insurgents. And so what to do? We committed more force to try and solve that problem.

And then I went back to Iraq in April of 2006, 15 months later, and I asked General Casey, How many foreign fighters are there and how many insurgents? And General Casey said, Congressman, there are 5,000 foreign fighters, there used to be 500, now 5,000; there used to be 5,000 insurgents, now there are 20,000 insurgents. And so what did we do? We threw in more force.

And now a year after that we stand here debating a resolution on whether we should commit another 20,000 troops to a mission that is poorly planned, from a military that has been strained by that poor planning and that is ill conceived.

Now, I want to be very clear, Mr. Speaker. If the President of the United States asked me to support additional troops into Afghanistan tonight to find Osama bin Laden, who by the way was the one who killed over 100 of my constituents, or to stop the resurgence of the Taliban, which by the way was the group of people who really gave aid and comfort to the enemy, I would vote for that tonight. I absolutely would vote for that tonight. But this decision by the President to put 20,000 more people into Iraq is the wrong number at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Mr. Speaker, during this debate I have heard my colleagues talk about the messages that we are sending our troops and how it will affect their morale, and I have an obligation as somebody who supports our military to suggest that if we had given our troops up-armor for their Humvees, Kevlar for their vests, night-vision goggles that work, and consistent rotations, their morale would be much better.

Our troops are not afraid of democracy being waged on the floor of the House of Representatives. And, in fact, on the chance that our enemies are listening to this debate, let me suggest that this debate doesn't give aid and comfort to our enemies. It tells our enemies what democracy is about. So for our enemies who may be listening: welcome to democracy. This is what it sounds like, this is what it looks like, and this is what we are willing to fight for.

What our servicemembers deserve to hear is the truth. What they deserve is a government that confronts reality rather than simply hoping for the best. So here is the truth, Mr. Speaker: somewhere between those who believe that we can stay the course in Iraq indefinitely and those who believe that we should leave Iraq tomorrow is the painful truth. The truth is that neither of those options will work.

Now, if you agree with me that that is the painful reality, then you are left with a hard choice: add 20,000 troops to continue the administration's ineffective plan, or try something different. 20,000 additional troops to Iraq, or rebuild our readiness here at home to deal with the growing challenges of Iran or naval expansion in China or genocide in Darfur or the other dangers in the world. Hold the Iraqi Government accountable for accelerating the training of their troops, or continue hoping for the best while putting the burden on the backs of 20,000 more U.S. troops.

Let me make two other points. The gentleman who preceded me, my friend from California, said, what do you have to offer? We have offered ideas; we have offered ideas from day one. The problem has been the stubborn resistance by the administration to listen to our ideas.

I have been advocating with my friend from California (Mrs. Tauscher) a status of forces agreement in Iraq, so that we would send the message that we are not occupiers, that we don't want to be there for one day longer than we need to be. The administration has rejected that.

I have been advocating with my friend from Pennsylvania (Mr. Carney) a one-for-one resolution. I and others have been advocating a formula, a one-for-one formula that says that for every Iraqi security force that stands up an American will be redeployed.

So we have provided ideas. And I want to once again offer a bipartisan invitation to my colleagues to work with us, because whether this resolution passes or not, the war is not going to end the next day. We still have many challenges ahead, and we are going to have to work together.

And, finally, Mr. Speaker, let me make a point about some of the characterizations that we have been listening to. As a Democrat, I know that there is not a single Republican who wakes up in the morning wanting this war to last for one day longer than it has to last. And in the same spirit, I am offended by anyone who would suggest that there is a Democrat who gives aid and comfort to the enemy, who wants us to be defeated, who wants us to lose. That is not what we are about.

We need to end the sound bites and the partisanship and the war rooms off the floor of the House that tell people what to say, and begin formulating effective policy for the troops that are listening to us tonight.

I visited my VA hospital yesterday, and I saw men and women in wheelchairs and gurneys. It didn't say Republican or Democrat on those wheelchairs and gurneys. When the time came, they went to fight for us. Our obligation is to stand by them, not with sound bites, not with policies that haven't worked before, but with new ideas for a stronger country.

Rep. Israel is a Member of the House Appropriations Committee and founder and co-chair of the Democratic Study Group on National Security and Chair of the Democratic Caucus Task Force on Military and Defense. He previously served on the House Armed Services Committee.