

Retired U.S. Commander of U.S. Forces in Iraq Backs Withdrawal

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - Lieutenant General Ricardo S. Sanchez, U.S. Army, retired, who served as the top American commander of U.S. Armed Forces in Iraq following the U.S. invasion in March 2003, spoke in support of Democratic plans for withdrawal on Saturday. In the Democratic weekly address, General Sanchez acknowledged the Bush administration's recent security gains in Iraq but called for a new direction towards regional stability focusing on diplomacy and political strategy:

"Under the Administration's recently announced plan, U.S. force levels in Iraq in July 2008 will be at about the same level they were in November 2006, when the American people demanded a change in direction in our Iraq policy.

"Our Army and Marine Corps are struggling with changing deployment schedules that are disrupting combat readiness training and straining the patience and daily lives of military families. It will take the Army at least a decade to repair the damage done to its full spectrum readiness, which is at its lowest level since the Vietnam War. In the meantime, the ability of our military to fully execute our national security strategy will be called into doubt, producing what is, in my judgment, unacceptable strategic risk.

"Although we cannot withdraw precipitously from Iraq, we must move rapidly to minimize our force presence. Shifting the primary mission of our troops away from combat will lead to a smaller U.S. military presence, and a greater obligation on the part of the Iraqis to take the lead in solving their country's problems. Having fewer American troops in Iraq will also allow us to devote more resources to refit our ground forces to respond to different contingencies in other parts of the world. However, for as long as we have troops in Iraq, the American people must insist that our deploying men and women are properly trained and properly equipped for the missions they will be asked to perform.

"The funding bill passed by the House of Representatives last week, with a bipartisan vote, makes the proper preparation of our deploying troops a priority and requires the type of shift in their mission that will allow their numbers to be reduced substantially. Furthermore, the bill puts America on the path to regaining our moral authority by requiring all government employees to abide by the Army Field Manual on interrogations, which is in compliance with the Geneva Conventions. America must accept nothing less.

"It is well past time to adopt a new approach in Iraq that will improve chances to produce stability in the Middle

East. I urge our political leaders to put aside partisan considerations and unite to lessen the burden our troops and their families have been under for nearly five years now. Strengthening America's security is a burden that must be shared by all Americans.

"America must mobilize our diplomatic, political, and economic power to achieve the reconciliation necessary to roll back DeBaathification and to advance the political progress in Iraq. Anything less is a dereliction of duty.

"This is retired Lieutenant General Ricardo S. Sanchez, and thank you for listening."

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