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GEORGE W. BUSH

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For Immediate Release  
Office of the Press Secretary  
September 5, 2006

## Response from the Chief of Staff Josh Bolten to a Democratic Letter

September 5, 2006

Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid  
528 Hart SOB  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Reid:

Thank you for your September 4 letter to the President. I am responding on his behalf.

A useful discussion of what we need to do in Iraq requires an accurate and fair-minded description of our current policy: As the President has explained, our goal is an Iraq that can govern itself, defend itself, and sustain itself. In order to achieve this goal, we are pursuing a strategy along three main tracks -- political, economic, and security. Along each of these tracks, we are constantly adjusting our tactics to meet conditions on the ground. We have witnessed both successes and setbacks along the way, which is the story of every war that has been waged and won.

Your letter recites four elements of a proposed "new direction" in Iraq. Three of those elements reflect well-established Administration policy; the fourth is dangerously misguided.

First, you propose "transitioning the U.S. mission in Iraq to counter-terrorism, training, logistics and force protection." That is what we are now doing, and have been doing for several years. Our efforts to train the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have evolved and accelerated over the past three years. Our military has had substantial success in building the Iraqi Army -- and increasingly we have seen the Iraqi Army take the lead in fighting the enemies of a free Iraq. The Iraqi Security Forces still must rely on U.S. support, both in direct combat and especially in key combat support functions. But any fair-minded reading of the current situation must recognize that the ISF are unquestionably more capable and shouldering a greater portion of the burden than a year ago -- and because of the extraordinary efforts of the United States military, we expect they will become increasingly capable with each passing month. Your recommendation that we focus on counter-terrorism training and operations -- which is the most demanding task facing our troops -- tracks not only with our policy but also our understanding, as well as the understanding of al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, that Iraq is a central front in the war against terror.

Second, your letter proposes "working with Iraqi leaders to disarm the militias and to develop a broad-based and sustainable political settlement, including amending the Constitution to achieve a fair sharing of power and resources." You are once again urging that the Bush Administration adopt an approach that has not only been embraced, but is now being executed. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is pursuing a national reconciliation project. It is an undertaking that (a) was devised by the Iraqis; (b) has the support of the United States, our coalition partners and the United Nations; and (c) is now being implemented. Further, in Iraq's political evolution, the Sunnis, who boycotted the first Iraq election, are now much more involved in the political process. Prime Minister Maliki is head of a free government that represents all communities in Iraq for the first time in that nation's history. It is in the context of this broad-based, unity government, and the lasting national compact that government is pursuing, that the Iraqis will consider what amendments might be required to the constitution that the Iraqi people adopted last year. On the matter of disarming militias: that is precisely what Prime Minister al-Maliki is working to do. Indeed, Coalition leaders are working with him and his ministers to devise and implement a program to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate members of militias and other illegal armed groups.

Third, your letter calls for "convening an international conference and contact group to support a political settlement in Iraq, to preserve Iraq's sovereignty, and to revitalize the stalled economic reconstruction and rebuilding effort." The International Compact for Iraq, launched recently by the sovereign Iraqi government and the United Nations, is the best way to work with regional and international partners to make substantial economic progress in Iraq, help revitalize the economic reconstruction and rebuilding of that nation, and support a fair and just political settlement in Iraq -- all while preserving Iraqi sovereignty. This effort is well under way, it has momentum, and I urge you to support it.

Three of the key proposals found in your letter, then, are already reflected in current U.S. and Iraqi policy in the region.

On the fourth element of your proposed "new direction," however, we do disagree strongly. Our strategy calls for redeploying troops from Iraq as conditions on the ground allow, when the Iraqi Security Forces are capable of defending their nation, and when our military commanders believe the time is right. Your proposal is driven by none of these factors; instead, it would have U.S. forces begin withdrawing from Iraq by the end of the year, without regard to the conditions on the ground. Because your letter lacks specifics, it is difficult to determine exactly what is contemplated by the "phased redeployment" you propose. (One such proposal, advanced by Representative Murtha, a signatory to your letter, suggested that U.S. forces should be redeployed as a "quick reaction force" to Okinawa, which is nearly 5,000 miles from Baghdad).

Regardless of the specifics you envision by "phased redeployment," any premature withdrawal of U.S. forces would have disastrous consequences for America's security. Such a policy would embolden our terrorist enemies; betray the hopes of the Iraqi people; lead to a terrorist state in control of huge oil reserves; shatter the confidence our regional allies have in America; undermine the spread of democracy in the Middle East; and mean the sacrifices of American troops would have been in vain. This "new direction" would lead to a crippling defeat for America and a staggering victory for Islamic extremists. That is not a direction this President will follow. The President is being guided by a commitment to victory -- and that plan, in turn, is being driven by the counsel and recommendations of

our military commanders in the region.

Finally, your letter calls for replacing Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. We strongly disagree. Secretary Rumsfeld is an honorable and able public servant. Under his leadership, the United States Armed Forces and our allies have overthrown two brutal tyrannies and liberated more than 50 million people. Al Qaeda has suffered tremendous blows. Secretary Rumsfeld has pursued vigorously the President's vision for a transformed U.S. military. And he has played a lead role in forging and implementing many of the policies you now recommend in Iraq. Secretary Rumsfeld retains the full confidence of the President.

We appreciate your stated interest in working with the Administration on policies that honor the sacrifice of our troops and promote our national security, which we believe can be accomplished only through victory in this central front in the War on Terror.

Sincerely,

Joshua B. Bolten  
Chief of Staff

Identical Letters Sent To:

The Honorable Harry Reid, Senate Democratic Leader  
The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, House Democratic Leader  
The Honorable Dick Durbin, Senate Assistant Democratic Leader  
The Honorable Steny Hoyer, House Minority Whip  
The Honorable Carl Levin, Ranking Member, Senate Armed Services Committee  
The Honorable Ike Skelton, Ranking Member, House Armed Services Committee  
The Honorable Joe Biden, Ranking Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
The Honorable Tom Lantos, Ranking Member, House International Relations Committee  
The Honorable Jay Rockefeller, Vice Chairman, Senate Intelligence Committee  
The Honorable Jane Harman, Ranking Member, House Intelligence Committee  
The Honorable Daniel Inouye, Ranking Member, Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee  
The Honorable John Murtha, Ranking Member, House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee

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