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Fresh Eyes on Iraq

By Frank Wolf

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Having just returned from my third trip to Iraq, I came away with three thoughts.

One, real progress is being made, despite the ongoing security concerns. Two, the Bush administration should pull together an independent and balanced group of respected individuals to go to Iraq to conduct a critical review of our efforts. Three, a necessary element of this review would be communicating to the American public what it would mean to our country if the Iraq mission failed.

I have now visited all but the Kurdish areas in northern Iraq and have seen improvement with each trip I have made. Schools are being renovated. Hospitals and health clinics are being built. Safe drinking water is available in places that it never was before. The new Iraqi army is being constituted. While we still have a long way to go, positive things are happening. Regrettably, they are often overshadowed by the suicide attacks carried out by foreign fighters who have poured into Iraq in hopes of undermining our progress and turning the Iraqi people against us. Yes, security remains our biggest challenge. It also limits where reporters can safely go, leaving them with little option but to focus on the bloodshed and bombings. But in truth, all across Iraq, in regions rarely visited by the media, there are heartening, albeit less riveting, stories of measurable progress.

These underreported but significant successes could be explored by the group tasked with reviewing our efforts in Iraq. The review would essentially provide "fresh eyes on the target" and assure Americans -- no matter what their positions are on the war -- that every effort is being made to protect our troops and realize our goal of a secure and peaceful Iraq. While the Bush administration has sent other teams to Iraq to assess the situation, the "fresh eyes" review I propose would be different in that, rather than just reporting back to the president, the secretary of defense or the secretary of state, this group would report to the American public. It would assess answers to questions such as:

- How accurate a picture do we have of the insurgency?
- What can we do to get better tactical intelligence on the enemy?
- How reliable and effective is the growing Iraqi security establishment and what is its ethnic makeup?
- What will it take in terms of resources, organization and time to effectively control Iraq's borders?
- What criteria should guide the pace of withdrawal of American and coalition forces?

In making its report to the American public, this group would also be assigned the task of outlining the potential consequences of failure in Iraq. During my trip I asked everyone I met with -- from members of the Iraqi leadership to senior military officers to State Department personnel -- what "failure" in Iraq would mean to the United States and the world. The responses were chilling. Most agreed there would be civil war, leading to chaos and the creation of another safe harbor for

terrorists, reminiscent of Afghanistan in the 1990s. Many said the entire Persian Gulf region would become destabilized, possibly leading to the downfall of the governments of Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. I heard references to Somalia and the former Yugoslavia, with its ethnic cleansing. U.S. credibility also is at stake. Reformers throughout the region would believe that America is a fair-weather friend, not to be depended upon, and the fragile seeds of democratic reform would be destroyed before they even took root.

The Bush administration needs to face the reality that a growing number of Americans are becoming skeptical of our efforts, partly because they do not have the benefit of seeing the entire picture. No one I talked to during my recent trip believes we will lose the war on the ground in Iraq; it's here at home that they are concerned about. One general told me point-blank that the "center of gravity" for our success in Iraq is the American public.

For the United States to stay the course in Iraq the public needs to fully appreciate the progress that has been made, be able to trust that those directing the war have made an honest assessment of what has gone right and what has gone wrong, and understand the potentially cataclysmic consequences of walking away from Iraq before the job is done.

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