

VFW: Success in Iraq Not Based on Timetables

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WASHINGTON — The national commander of the nation's largest organization of combat veterans fully agrees with President Bush that much progress has occurred in Iraq over the past 15 months, and after two days of testimony by America's top general and diplomat in Iraq, he believes lawmakers in Congress are also starting to realize that, too. But one thing George Lisicki is adamantly against is another call by some politicians to again force artificial troop withdrawal timetables on military commanders in the field.

"It is impossible to simultaneously fight an enemy to your front and politicians in your rear who are more focused on political gain than winning a war," said Lisicki, who leads the 2.3 million-member Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. of its Auxiliaries. "We all want the war to end, but how it ends is also important."

Army Gen. David H. Petraeus and U.S. Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker came to Washington this week to update Congress on the security situation in Iraq, and to make recommendations to the administration on The Way Forward strategy. Two of the many recommendations the president approved was to reduce the current Army deployment length back to 12 months starting in August, and at the same time have a 45-day pause in troop redeployments to better assess security conditions.

In contrast to their last appearance before Congress seven months ago, Petraeus and Crocker came armed with 15 months of data to prove that forward progress is being made in Iraq. They also left little doubt that everything gained could be quickly erased if U.S. forces were prematurely withdrawn.

"The progress is real but fragile," answered Petraeus during questioning, a response that was echoed by Crocker, who said "Almost everything about Iraq is hard, but hard does not mean hopeless."

Lisicki agrees. "Violence is down, the economy is rebounding, the Iraqi military is beginning independent security operations, and the Iraqi government is finally showing signs of political reconciliation," he said. "Combat veterans may not be known for our patience, but we do know the difference between moving forward and treading water."

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The VFW national commander said it also appeared during the question and answer sessions that lawmakers on both sides of the aisle were finally able to see beyond Iraq and address the larger picture of Middle East stability, and the impact the high operations tempo was having on military readiness, training and equipment. But Lisicki remains concerned that some lawmakers continue to believe that withdrawing U.S. troops will end the threat to America.

"An argument can still be made whether Iraq was a threat to America in 2003, but there are Al Qaeda and other extremists from neighboring countries who are in Iraq today just to kill Americans. It would be extremely naïve to believe they will stop wanting to kill Americans just because we pull out of Iraq," he said.

"We all want the war to end, but we absolutely cannot pass up the opportunity to destroy this enemy on their turf just because some say the sacrifice is too great, or it costs too much, or because their constituents are tired of war," said Lisicki.

"Progress is happening in Iraq, albeit slowly and with no guarantee of success, but what can be guaranteed is that if America simply quits Iraq, chaos will reign throughout the entire Middle East, and our brave sons and daughters in uniform will be tasked to go back again to finish the job.

"The mission of the U.S. military is to protect and defend and win our nation's wars. The mission of our lawmakers is to fully support them with what they need, when they need it, and then get out of their way."