

Schakowsky: Time to Leave Iraq After Two Years

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Evanston Review

March 17, 2005

The Bush administration should pull American forces from Iraq as soon as possible, and could begin an exit by mid-year, U.S. House Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, said this week, just days before the second anniversary of the war's start.

Schakowsky said she didn't expect the administration would do that so soon, but she predicted that growing pressure from the public, and eventually from Congress, would force President George W. Bush into considering such a move well before U.S. mid-term elections in 2006.

"By the middle of this year, I think we could begin a rapid withdrawal (and be out) by the end of this year," the Evanston Democrat said Monday. "Do I think it's likely? I don't. But I think it's important to keep pressing for it."

"I wouldn't be surprised to see the Bush administration, before too long, address this. And I think it will be sooner rather than later that there will be a consensus about needing to leave," she said.

Schakowsky acknowledged that few in her own party have publicly called for the administration to announce a specific exit strategy or dates for leaving Iraq.

"But I think the voices for withdrawal are getting louder among the American people, and I think the (January Iraqi) elections in many ways have stimulated that," she said.

Schakowsky was among Democrats who voted in October of 2002 against authorizing the president to go to war against Iraq. She said this week she did not regret her stand.

She predicted that public and Congressional pressure to leave Iraq would rise as the American death toll and the financial costs rise, and as Americans begin to worry more about domestic political issues such as proposed Social Security changes.

"There are the roughly 1,500 soldiers whose deaths barely make the front page anymore, and uncounted numbers of innocent Iraqis who are dead," she said.

Schakowsky said the war did not help make America safer from terrorists, although that was a stated reason for going into Iraq.

She quoted a January CIA report which, she said, stated that Iraq is the newest breeding ground for a new generation of terrorists.

"That was not the case when we invaded Iraq ... this war has solidified opinion against America in the Islamic world and has cemented it elsewhere across the world."

A pullout is supported by most Iraq citizens, even members of the Shiite Islamic majority who benefited from the January Iraq elections, she claimed.

Schakowsky said America and its coalition partners have failed to improve the life of most Iraqis since the war began, saying "There's less electricity there than before the war, there are food shortages, and the number of Iraqi children suffering malnutrition has doubled," she added.

High cost

The lack of progress has come despite an ever-higher financial cost, Schakowsky said. Current spending in Iraq has reached close to \$200 billion, with about \$1.6 billion spent each week since war began on March 18, 2003, she said.

"I've consistently been asking for an accounting of how that money has been spent, and we still have no accountability," she said, citing a report by the U.S. special inspector general for Iraqi reconstruction released earlier this year. That report stated the coalition provisional authority which ruled Iraq before elections there could not account for more than \$9 billion spent under its administration.

Despite all the dollars that have been spent in Iraq, American soldiers still don't have enough personal or vehicle armor, she said, adding "it's the height of hypocrisy, not to mention absolutely unacceptable."

Asked if her opinion on that was at odds with her previous anti-spending votes, she said, "Despite my 'no' votes (the administration has) gotten every single penny they've asked for and our soldiers still haven't gotten what they need."

The House is expected to vote next week on an administration request for \$82 billion in military funding, most of it for operations in Iraq.