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Congress's Unprincipled Proposals on Iraq Could Put Lives and Nation at Risk

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Legislative proposals to limit operations in Iraq could have troubling consequences. Members of Congress and all Americans have the right to express their views on military operations. This is how democracies fight wars: They argue about what's right before, during, and decades after conflicts. But when dissent becomes obstructionism, it can undermine democracy. Only by following a "principled" approach to Iraq can Congress avoid overreaching its responsibilities.

Principles for Action. Legislation must adhere to two principles to sustain a democracy's war-making power:

Principle #1. Never take battlefield decisions away from commanders. In war, democracies elect and appoint citizens to take charge, and then hold them accountable, but democracies do not dictate their actions. Once troops are engaged in combat, the more decisions that affect their livelihood are made by individuals removed from command responsibilities, day-to-day involvement in operations, and intimate knowledge of the situation, the more likely it is troops will be needlessly placed in harm's way.

Principle #2. Never undermine the commander-in-chief's capacity to defend the nation. America can afford to lose a war. What this democracy cannot afford to lose is its capacity to fight wars. The United States is a great nation that can endure all manners of trials, hardships, and setbacks and still have the means to fight to keep

itself free, safe, and prosperous. But if Congress undermines the President's constitutional authority as commander-in-chief, America will lose the ability to marshal its power in times of war. Unity of command is absolutely essential. Any precedents that undermine the power of this President could well be used to hamstring future Presidents.

Grading Congress. Some congressional proposals clearly violate any commitment to principled action:

Bad Idea #1: Proposals to limit troop use. Proposals mandating levels of training and equipping, lengths of deployments, or the time between deployments would violate both principles. Such limitations are unrealistic. Armies rarely go into battle with all the equipment, people, and preparation they need. With such standards in place, Americans would have never fought at Trenton, Cantigny, the Battle of the Bulge, or the Chosin Reservoir. No army can fight and win with these kinds of restrictions. In addition, legislative delays on committing troops will put the soldiers already on the ground at far greater risk. Even a proposal that allows the President to

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waive such restrictions for military necessity is risky. Waiver criteria will be controversial, using waivers will always leave the President open to criticism, and the delays in obtaining waivers could cost lives.

Bad Idea #2: Proposals to redefine the scope of the military mission. These include proposals limiting U.S. troops to counterterrorism and training missions and prohibiting them from quelling sectarian violence. Such proposals are impractical to implement. The enemy, aware of these limitations, would craft its operations so that U.S. troops could not effectively respond to their attacks. As a result, U.S. soldiers would be at greater risk. At the same time, the commander-in-chief could be prohibited from taking the

most effective actions to accomplish the mission and protect U.S. soldiers.

Democracy in Peril. Manipulating combat operations by political fiat to achieve a political end is the quickest path to undermining the ability of a free nation to fight wars and could well result in the unintended consequence of imperiling the lives of the men and women already on the battlefield. Congress must stick to principled action to avoid these tragedies.

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