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MoveOn Virtual Town Hall: Iraq

John Edwards' responses to questions from MoveOn members about how to end the war in Iraq

Question 1 - From MoveOn Member Anita Todras, a mortgage loan officer from Coconut Creek, Florida:

In your opinion, what is the best and fastest way to get out of Iraq?

Response

Well thank you. First of all, let me say for the past 9 months, MoveOn members have accomplished amazing things for the progressive movement.

Last year you helped elect a new Congress. And thanks to your relentless grassroots pressure, you've actually helped shift the national debate about ending the war in Iraq from a question of 'if,' to a question of 'how soon.' Thank you.

As you probably know, I voted for this war. I was wrong and I take responsibility for that.

Every day this war drags on, it's worse for Iraq, worse for our troops— and worse for our country. We don't need more debate; we don't need symbolic resolutions; and we don't need abstract goals—what we need are binding requirements. And we can't wait until the next president takes office in 2009.

Here's what I believe ought to happen:

Simply put: Congress should use its funding authority to force President Bush to end the war and start immediately bringing American troops home from Iraq.

I've been advocating for Congress to use its funding authority since I voted against the first 87 billion dollar supplemental back in 2003. That funding authority is still the most powerful check we have—if Congress is willing to use it.

I'd propose we begin by capping funding levels at 100,000 troops to stop Bush's escalation and force an immediate withdrawal of 40,000 to 50,000 troops, which should come out of the north and the south of Iraq.

During that time, we should not allow Bush to deploy any replacement troops to Iraq that do not meet real readiness standards and that have not been properly trained and equipped.

Our withdrawal will help us to directly engage the Iranians and the Syrians to help stabilize Iraq.

The withdrawal of all combat troops should be complete in about a year.

So that's the outline of my plan for what ought to happen. But we should not be talking hypothetically, because we have already reached a critical moment, and what we do right now will make all the difference.

Thanks in part to your hard work, both houses of Congress have recently passed funding bills that set a time table for withdrawal. President Bush has promised to veto that funding, calculating that he can use the bully pulpit to intimidate Congress and get them to back down.

But this is not the time for political calculation, this is the time for political courage. This is not a game of chicken. This is not about making friends or keeping Joe Lieberman happy. This is about life and death—this about war. We are done letting George Bush manipulate the rhetoric of patriotism, only to use our troops as political pawns. If Bush vetoes funding for the troops, he's the only one standing in the way of the resources they need. Nobody

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else.

Congress must stand firm. They must not write George Bush another blank check without a timeline for withdrawal—period. If Bush vetoes the funding bill, Congress should send another funding bill to him with a binding plan to bring the troops home. And if he vetoes it again, they should do it again.

The American people are overwhelmingly in favor of ending this war. If our side stands firm, if we show courage now, we can finally bring our troops back home and bring this war to an end.

Thank you.

Question 2 - From MoveOn member C. Davey Utter, a retired NBC broadcaster from Venice, California:

What are you going to do about prosecuting war profiteering in Iraq?

Response

Well let me say first I will end war profiteering in Iraq.

What the Bush administration has done is they've signed no-bid contracts with Halliburton and Bechtel to complete billions of dollars of work in Iraq. Not only does this war profiteering waste taxpayer dollars; it undermines the credibility of America's reconstruction efforts in the eyes of the world.

We need to do everything in our power to get rid of fraud and abuse in Iraq. We need to hold powerful corporations like Halliburton accountable for no-bid contracts they've secured through cronyism.

None of you will be surprised to hear that I believe in using the U.S. judicial system to hold powerful corporations like Halliburton responsible for their wrongdoing—I've done it for a long time.

For all new Iraq contracts, we should impose a cap on profits from Iraqi reconstruction. Contractors should be permitted to earn only a reasonable profit on their Iraq contracts, based on the average profits of comparable, competitively bid government contracts. This is a version of the excess profits tax that was imposed during the First and Second World Wars. As President Franklin Roosevelt explained, in a time of war, "the few [should] not gain from the sacrifices of the many."

We should also bar corporations, senior executives, lobbyists and directors from making donations to presidential candidates and political parties for at least a year before or after bidding on a major government contract

Finally, we ought to break the link between government procurement and private sector contracting jobs. Private sector executives seeking government contracts would not be able to take official contracting jobs for 12 months, and similarly, those with responsibility for contracting would not be able to go to firms seeking contracts for 12 months.

Question 3

The Iraq bill recently passed by the House included a version of Rep. John Murtha's proposal forcing the President to certify that troops going to Iraq meet the Pentagon's standards for sufficient training, proper equipment, and overall readiness to fight. Do you support this approach and do you think it should be in the conference committee's final version of the Iraq bill?

Response

Yes.

Representative Murtha's bill echoed the policy that I actually announced in February of this year, I believe in it strongly.

In my policy, I would prohibit funding to deploy any new troops or any replacement troops to Iraq that do not meet real readiness standards and that have not been properly trained and equipped, so that American tax dollars are used to train and equip our troops, and not used to escalate this war.

Requiring the President to make sure that the troops are prepared is actually the best way to stand by our troops and it's also the best way to force this President to change his policy.

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The members of the conference committee have to stand strong on this requirement. They should stand up to this President's veto threat and they ought to pass this legislation and stand behind it.

Closing Statement

I spoke earlier about the need for political courage and the need for political courage to trump political calculation.

We know George Bush and Karl Rove will deploy the full fury of their PR machine to blame Democrats for Bush's choice—Bush's choice—to veto funding for the troops.

There are many people in Washington that are going to be tempted to cry uncle and say they'll say we're going to let Bush win another round in this fight.

So where will Congress find the courage to stand firm?

I'll tell you where they'll find it. They'll find it in your letters. They'll find it in your calls. They will find it in your voice.

Forty years ago, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a sermon speaking out against the war in Vietnam. He said, "There comes a time in all of our lives when silence is a betrayal."

That has never been more true than it is today. It's true because in the weeks and months to come our voice has extraordinary power to really change things—and that means we have an absolute responsibility to use that power to the fullest.

So that's what I'm committing to—using every opportunity I have in this campaign to speak out for immediate action to end this war. And it's what you're doing—through you work with MoveOn and in your communities.

Together, I believe we will succeed. And it is a great honor for me to join you in that effort.

Thank you all very much.

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