



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research

“Back from Baghdad: Views from Veterans of the Iraq Mission”

Wohlstetter Conference Center, AEI, 1150 17th St NW

Thursday, August 14, 2008 12pm

The American Enterprise Institute invited **David Bellavia**, **Capt. Erik Swabb**, and **Colin Kahl** to share their day to day experiences in Iraq, to discuss a potential withdrawal of U.S. troops, and the effects of the Surge on the ground. David Bellavia is a former U.S. Army soldier and co-founder of Vets for Freedom, Capt. Erik Swabb is a U.S. Marine Corps member and currently attends Harvard Law School, and Colin Kahl is a Senior Fellow of the Center for a New American Security. **Danielle Pletka**, Vice President for Foreign and Defense Policy Studies at AEI, moderated the event.

David Bellavia began the event by introducing his organization, Vets For Freedom, and describing the changes he had seen in Iraq during his tour of duty. Bellavia voiced frustration with the domestic debate on Iraq and the “surge deniers” who are unwilling to accept that the situation has improved. In regard to U.S. troop withdrawal, he warned that **within 90 days, the enemy could regroup.**

Erik Swabb noted the incredible change he witnessed in Iraq, as he was among the first to implement the new strategy of tribal engagement under the Surge. “No one could have predicted how quickly the strategy could have improved the situation.” Swabb discussed the improvements within the Iraqi Security Force. “**The police force, however, is another question.** Working with them, you see how far they’ve come and how far they need to go.”

While noting that there has been substantial and undeniable progress and al-Qaeda no longer poses a threat to Iraq’s stability or government, **Colin Kahl** stated that “no one is declaring a victory dance” just yet. **Security gains are “fragile and reversible” because none of the underlying political tensions have been addressed.** “If [the Sons of Iraq] aren’t integrated and given an opportunity to share power in free and fair elections,” then security gains could be compromised.

Kahl argued that the Surge was premised on a flawed belief that “if we build their capacity, then they will get along.” Instead, we have helped build their capacity and **there has been less interest in reconciliation.** We need to “design a policy to put leverage on them to make difficult political decisions.”

When asked about the upcoming U.S. election, Kahl argued that there will be “**a lot fewer U.S. soldiers in Iraq in 2009 regardless of who is president,**” but each candidate differs on “the level of presence they will leave behind, the conditions for this residual presence, and whether they use this presence to encourage reconciliation.”

When asked about what should be done to reconcile Kurdish and Arabs, Kahl argued that there are a **series of overlapping issues (oil, Kirkuk) that should be treated holistically**. “Give a little on the oil law in exchange for power sharing in Kirkuk, for example.” Kahl warned that if the Kurdish regional government were allowed to annex Kirkuk, then it is unlikely that Arab/Kurdish tensions can be resolved because there will be little leverage over them.

When asked about Iraqi national and provincial elections, Kahl argued that **if the elections are truly fair, there will be a new political scene** because “none of the established parties have a lot of grassroots support,” and that could be good for reconciliation. Kahl warned that this could also be dangerous because “those powers want to remain in power,” and **there is evidence that the elections could be unfair**.

In regards to conditionality of U.S. support, Swabb argued that **“the threat needs to be credible**, you have to be willing to call your bluff. And most wonder whether we could just step away.”