

Presenter: Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, May 01, 2008

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Media Availability with Secretary Gates at the Fort Bliss Restoration and Resilience Center, Fort Bliss, Texas

I'll take a few questions.

Q Prime Minister Maliki is sending a delegation to Iran to discuss Iranian meddling in Iraq.

How crucial is that to stemming the surge in violence in Iraq, which this month has reached a seven-month high?

SEC. GATES: I think it's a very important step, and I think that the Iranians do care about what the shape of their future relationship with Iraq will be. And I think that, in essence, forcing them to make a choice -- do they want to work with the government of Iraq, or are they going to subvert the government of Iraq? And for a Shi'ite prime minister to send a delegation to Iran, presumably to confront the Iranians with that kind of a choice, I think, is a healthy development.

Q If he comes back empty-handed, then what?

SEC. GATES: Well, I don't know how you evaluate the success or failure of a mission like that, except over time and looking back and seeing if the supply of weapons and training and so on, has diminished.

(Break)

Q (Off mike) -- talk about more Americans against the war. They compare it to another Vietnam -- Fort Bliss. Your own feelings about that?

SEC. GATES: Just in terms of the number of Americans who are against the war?

Q Fighting in Iraq.

SEC. GATES: Well, I think the question is, at this point, not whether or not we should be in Iraq. We are there. The question is, what's the endgame? How do we handle the final phases of this conflict in a way that do not leave us with a bigger problem in Iraq than we started with? How do we end up with a government in Iraq that is an ally in the war on terror, can defend itself, is basically representative of its people?

So we are where we are, and we have to manage properly how we get from here to where Americans would like us to be, and that is basically out of Iraq in any sense of a major combat role.

My own view is, we are going to require a residual presence in Iraq, of some size, for a period of years, as a stabilization force to help go after al Qaeda, to continue training Iraqis. But I think that despite our impatience as we enter the sixth year of the war, we still have to handle the end of the war and the end of our participation, in major combat, in a sensible and thoughtful way.