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Quick withdrawal would be bad foreign policy move
By Lawrence J. Haas

Washington – Democrats, who have long struggled to assure Americans that they will keep them safe, now have a golden opportunity to prove it.

The Democrats, who two years ago trailed Republicans by over 30 points in polls asking which party is best equipped to handle national security, have pulled even. And, now controlling Congress, they have a platform to promote a strong and effective foreign policy.

But, by pushing for a speedy withdrawal from Iraq, whatever the conditions on the ground, Democrats would nip that opportunity in the bud. Though appealing in this period of national discontent, such a withdrawal would make American less secure and, eventually, it would remind mainstream voters why they previously had not trusted Democrats to keep them safe.

The issue is not how America went to Iraq – whether President Bush skewed the intelligence on weapons of mass destruction, or whether he could have more adeptly brought our allies along.

Nor is the issue how Bush is managing the war. Clearly, we need a serious change in strategy and tactics, for the violence in Iraq dampens hopes for democracy or even stability in a land for which we now have a strategic interest and a moral responsibility.

The overriding issue is what a swift withdrawal would mean for national security. The fact is, the world is watching what we do – from the terrorists who have made Iraq the central focus of their anti-Western jihad, to a host of nations and terrorist groups that already doubt U.S. resolve.

North Korea and Iran are taunting America with their nuclear weapons programs and threatening a blood bath if we try to stop them; Iran, Syria, and their terrorist client, Hezbollah, are working to de-stabilize the U.S.-backed government in Lebanon; and a rising China takes delight in America's troubles.

Our most vocal and vicious enemies, including al-Qaida's Osama bin Laden and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah, cite our withdrawals from Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia, and elsewhere over the last three decades as proof that the world's lone superpower is a "paper tiger" at heart.

Simply put, our enemies anticipate that Iraq will be the latest chapter in the book of American defeatism. Our withdrawal will embolden them to push ahead, confident that

we lack the stomach for confrontation, that our commitments mean nothing, that they can win by simply outlasting us.

Also watching are the brave activists in the Middle East and elsewhere, those who risk their lives every day to promote pluralism in the face of repressive regimes and who took seriously the Bush doctrine of promoting freedom and democracy abroad as an antidote to terror.

The fact is, moderate voices in the Middle East are perhaps our most powerful weapon in the long war against Islamic extremism. But moderates need to know that the world's most powerful nation believes that the fight we share with them is worth not just their effort, but ours. A withdrawal from the current field of battle will do nothing to nourish their bravery.

Watching as well are the American people. To be sure, many of them support a swift withdrawal from Iraq. These withdrawal advocates will praise the politicians who seek to bring it about. But, over time, the larger public will be less forgiving. They will once more see a Democratic Party driven by defeatism, much like the late 1970s in the aftermath of our defeat in Vietnam.

Here's the bottom line: a quick withdrawal would make America less safe in the long run, and it would come back to bite the political party that makes it a key element of its national security policy.

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