

Murtha: ‘Because They Say It, Doesn’t Make It So’

National Public Radio aired an interview with Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) on Dec. 1. The following is the transcript.

Murtha: We need to change direction. And the overwhelming calls I’m getting, the emotional response I’m getting—they are thirsting for a direction, a plan. The latest plan of the President’s is not a plan. It’s just the same thing. And when I visit the hospitals and see these troops that are so shot up, I realize that we need to change direction. That change of direction is what I’ve proposed.

Q: Congressman, you’re saying that the time has come, and that the U.S. should pull out fast. A number of your fellow Democrats, though, have some real problems with this. Congressman Steny Hoyer of Maryland said, “A precipitous withdrawal of American forces in Iraq could lead to disaster, spawning civil war, fostering a haven for terrorists.” It sounds like something you yourself wrote in an epilogue to your own book. About a year ago you said, “An untimely exit could rapidly devolve into a civil war.”

Murtha: I said 18 months ago that we either had to totally mobilize, or we had to get out. A year ago I said we can’t win this militarily. I’ve changed my mind, obviously. Because we’ve come to the point where our troops are the targets of the insurgency. There’s four plans that I’ve seen, and three of them are not good; one is the President’s plan, that’s “Stay the Course.” That’s not a plan. Two, is that you mobilize

completely. If you mobilize, you'd have to have a draft. And we're not about to have a draft, even though I'm for it. The other [plan] is advisors that are with the troops. Now, when you look at the rosy scenario that the President tries to portray, none of those things are accurate—you can sit here in your air-conditioned office, and you can say, stay the course, but, let me tell you something. Those troops out in the field are the ones that are suffering.

Q: If the U.S. were to do what you're saying they should, and pull troops out within six months, what's the scenario that you see happening there? Would it be civil war, and, doesn't that matter?

Murtha: Let me tell you something. That's up to them. We're caught in the middle of a civil war right now. The military has completed its mission. It's done its duty. It's up to the Iraqis to settle this themselves. We can't let them decide how long we stay. And it's not a decision made by the military commanders, either. These decisions are made by the United States Congress and by the President of the United States. We sent them to war, and we can only speak for them. Military commanders talk to me all the time, privately, and what they're saying privately is not what they're saying publicly.

Q: Why do you think that is? Why do you think there's—

Murtha: Why do you think? It's because they fired [Army Chief of Staff Eric] Shinseki, that's why it is.

Q: You're talking about General Shinseki, who had called for 200,000 troops that would be needed to stabilize Iraq.

Murtha: Exactly. And of course they had way too few. I am convinced that all you do is kill more Americans if you leave us in there.

Q: There is a political process under way in Iraq, though, and one of your colleagues on the Senate side, Democrat Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, thinks that Iraq is actually within reach of a watershed transformation. That this is a prime moment of opportunity, and that U.S. forces are part of that opportunity.

Murtha: Secretary [Robert] McNamara thought the same thing in 1963. He said that this will be over in two years. Lyndon Johnson said over and over again, how well it was going. He said how many people had been taken care of, how many had been educated in the Vietnam War. We're hearing the same thing now. Just because they say it does not make it so.

Q: When you've gone to Iraq—you were there most recently this past Summer—what do commanders tell you?

Murtha: They tell me they don't have enough troops.

Q: Not enough troops. Have any of them actually said, it's time to pull out; we think we're done here and we've got

to come home right now?

Murtha: Well, I'll put it this way. I wouldn't say what they've said, because they know who I've met with. But I've certainly got the message from retired people from all over the country, and this is not up to the military commanders. Military commanders are afraid to say anything. You don't get it. The military commanders are afraid because they'll be fired.

Q: Have they told you that?

Murtha: Have they told me that? Isn't it evident?

Q: Well, I'm asking based on the tenor of those conversations that you've had.

Murtha: Let me just tell you something. Even sergeants are telling me that the officers are afraid to say anything. There's no question about it.

Q: If they are telling you though, that they need more troops, that doesn't to me sound like a message of it's time to withdraw.

Murtha: They want more troops to do the mission that they are given to do. Like protect against the Syrian border.

Q: Have they asked for those troops?

Murtha: I don't know.

Q: I mean, the President has said if the Generals need more troops, all they have to do is ask.

Murtha: Yeah, well, there's a lot of things they've said over there that turned out not to be true. For instance, they said the troops were adequately prepared when they went into Iraq. They said there'd be no insurgency. They said there wasn't an insurgency at all. I mean, you go back and look at some of the things they've said, and you find obvious errors and omissions. And either someone is misinforming the President, or he's not listening to the advice.

Q: Given the positions that the President has staked out, on the War in Iraq, and U.S. troop presence there, do you see any way he could change what he's been saying, which is that we're there until complete victory is achieved?

Murtha: We're going to be out of there—there'll be very few troops left there by the end of the year.

Q: You believe that?

Murtha: I believe that.

Q: And how would he explain that, then?

Murtha: That's up to him how he's going to explain it.

Q: And is the idea that you would expect to see them home by the time of the elections in 2006?

Murtha: I think that could very well be the watershed date.