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September 9, 2004

The Honorable Donald H. Rumsfeld
Secretary of Defense
The Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Mr. Secretary:

As you know, I have been reading and studying military history my entire adult life. I think it is critically important that students of history delve into the strategy, operational art, and tactics of the engagements that shaped the course of this nation and our role in the world. We ignore the lessons of the past engagements at our peril.

It is for that reason that I am so concerned with the strategy we are following in Iraq when it comes to sanctuaries in cities like Fallujah and Ramadi. I cannot think of these cities without thinking of the lessons of Vietnam. We learned then that if we leave sanctuaries to fester, we will suffer the consequences later when we have to fight another day and against a stronger adversary.

When I woke on Labor Day morning, it was to the disturbing news that seven Marines were killed outside Fallujah. The news saddened me more than I can tell you. But what I find more distressing is that the perpetrators of this attack might with impunity go safely back to Fallujah to emerge from their holes again to kill more American troops.

I know of the constraints that face us. There is now a sovereign Iraqi government which must make come to terms with the pressures of governing a state pressured by factions and a steady insurgency. They face upcoming elections with all the attendant political complexities that come with that. I know too that we are trying to build long-term capacity in the form of viable Iraqi security forces. Lieutenant General Petraeus is giving that mission his all. But it is a long-term mission, and we can't risk sinking further into a quagmire while we wait for these forces to be fully trained. We need a strategy now to force the insurgents from their dens. We can not afford to surrender the cities of Iraq to the insurgents and then sit by while they attack us from these safe havens. Allowing the enemy to establish sanctuaries didn't work 35 years ago in Vietnam, and it doesn't work today in Iraq.

I would like to hear your strategy for dealing with this issue. It is critical that we not allow this problem to grow worse over the next months even as we help the Iraqis make their political transition. We must ensure that there is both have a viable Iraqi state and security for both the Iraqi people and American forces.

Sincerely,


Ike Skelton
Ranking Democrat