

**JANUARY 20**

# A shaky media taboo: withdrawal from Iraq

**T**he latest polls show that most Americans are critical of the war in Iraq. But the option of swiftly withdrawing all U.S. troops from that country gets little media attention.

So far this year, many news outlets have lapsed into conjecture on what George W. Bush has in mind for the Iraq war. At the end of a recent lengthy editorial, the New York Times noted that "there's speculation about whether President Bush intends to use the arrival of a new elected government [in Baghdad] as an occasion to declare victory and begin pulling out American troops."

Right now, that kind of speculation amounts to a smokescreen for a war-crazed administration. Its evident intention is for large numbers of U.S. troops to stay in Iraq for a long time.

Predictably, as Seymour Hersh reports in the Jan. 24 edition of the New Yorker, "Bush's re-election is regarded within the administration as evidence of America's support for his decision to go to war. It has reaffirmed the position of the neoconservatives in the Pentagon's civilian leadership who advocated the invasion." According to one of Hersh's sources, Donald Rumsfeld told the Joint Chiefs of Staff after the Nov. 2 election that "America was committed to staying in Iraq and that there would be no second-guessing."

Recent opinion polls show that most of the U.S. public has a negative view of the war – but Americans seem to be all over the map about what to do now.

"Support for the war in Iraq has continued to erode, but most Americans still are inclined to give the Bush administration some time to try to stabilize the country before it withdraws U.S. troops," the Los Angeles Times reported the day before Bush's re-inauguration. The paper's new national poll "found that the percentage of Americans who believed the situation in Iraq was 'worth going to war over' had sunk to a new low of 39 percent." In the poll, 47 percent of Americans "said they would like to see most of the troops out within a year," while 49 percent "say they could support a longer deployment."

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Politically, as a practical matter, Bush can maintain plenty of leverage to keep escalating the war in Iraq. We should remember that the Vietnam War went on for years longer while public-opinion data showed that most Americans thought it was wrong.

Now – at the outset of Bush's second term – strong advocacy for immediate withdrawal should become part of the national debate.

Sixteen members of the U.S. House of Representatives launched an initiative in that direction on Jan. 12 with a letter to President Bush urging him "to take immediate steps to begin the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq." Led by Rep. Lynn Woolsey of California, the signers contended: "It has become clear that the existence of more than 130,000 American troops stationed on Iraqi soil is infuriating to the Iraqi people – especially because Saddam Hussein did not possess weapons of mass destruction and did not have a connection to the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, or to the al Qaeda terrorist organization. Indeed, the very presence of Americans in Iraq is a rallying point for dissatisfied people in the Arab world."

Few media outlets beyond California did any substantive reporting on the letter. But it could turn out to be an initial step on a long journey for efforts to achieve a congressional cutoff of funds for the Iraq war. Such efforts can only be successful if immense grassroots pressure develops to compel members of Congress to take action.

Rep. Woolsey is set to take another step by introducing a resolution in the House of Representatives calling for U.S. troops to come home from Iraq as soon as logistically possible. Her office told me on Jan. 19 that Woolsey's resolution – still in draft form and not yet circulated to House members – was scheduled to be introduced in late January.

If left up to newsroom editors and mainstream pundits, the Woolsey resolution will scarcely cause a ripple in the national media pond. But the resolution could do much more than sink like a stone. It has the potential to serve as a catalyst for nationwide debate.

Whether that happens will depend on grassroots activists around the country. The Woolsey resolution could have historic impact if they take up the challenge and effectively demand that congressional representatives get behind it.

At a time when the media terrain is so bleak and the media-framed debates are so narrow, the possibility remains to create historic news and not just consume it.

*Norman Solomon's next book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer by Wiley.*