

Iraq Forum

Sponsored by Reps. Woolsey, Lee, Waters and Hinchey
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Testimony of Charlie Anderson, U.S. Navy (Retired)

Congresswoman Woolsey, Representatives and distinguished guests, it is a pleasure to appear before you to discuss the need for a military withdrawal from Iraq.

I joined the United States Navy at age 19, immediately after I graduated from high school. Like most young people who join the military, my reasons were both philosophical and economic. I wanted money for college, I wanted skill training, and I wanted time to decide what I really wanted from life. But more than that, I wanted to serve a cause greater than myself and I wanted to defend the American ideals expressed in the Constitution. I believed that the Navy would be my career for the majority of the nine years I served. I am still honored to have served my country. However, the events that occurred in Iraq made further service impossible.

I boarded a plane on February 1, 2003. The reasons I was being sent to war were Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and ties between the Saddam Hussein regime and the Al Qaeda terrorist network. At the time I regarded the validity of this information largely irrelevant. Soldiers do not set policy, we enforce policy. We follow orders. We have no choice save to do what we are told and hope that our nation's leadership will not send us into combat for the wrong reasons. In this case, the government of the United States of America failed us.

I was completely untrained and unprepared for what I experienced in Iraq. In the seven years preceding my deployment to the Middle East, including two years with a Marine infantry battalion, I had not set foot in the desert or had any training on how to fight or survive there. I had fired my nine millimeter service pistol exactly once, in the summer of 2000. I was such a poor shot that the range safety officer threw me off the range. The next time I fired my weapon was around April 13, 2003 in what is now Sadr City, Iraq, when my convoy was ambushed. Following that engagement, I was told I would not be issued replacement ammunition because there was none to be had. My platoon Sergeant told me "do not shoot unless your death is imminent," as though I would be firing my weapon for any other purpose.

My battalion "crossed the line" on March 20, 2003. We moved up to Basra then across near Nassaria and then finally, straight up the center of the country to circle Baghdad and enter through what is now Sadr City. We fought three major engagements and took a total of four combat dead and one to friendly fire. We were redeployed to the United States at the end of May almost as soon as President Bush issued his "Mission Accomplished Speech." I knew at that time redeploying forces from the theatre would be a mistake because we were still encountering resistance and no major units had surrendered, they had just evaporated into the cities. Major Combat was over only in the World War II sense. However, the Guerrilla War was just beginning.

I watched through the summer and into the fall as the American death toll continued to rise. However through this time I was dealing with my own demons. Each time a firecracker went off or a car backfired, I dove for cover. Once while driving at Camp Lejeune, I drove past a rifle range that I did not know was "hot" until they began firing. I realized two miles down the road that I was doing over sixty miles an hour. I was having nightmares and insomnia. I had a short temper and frequent flashbacks. These are classic symptoms of PTSD, yet like most veterans I know, I was in denial. It was not until I spent New Year's 2003/2004 curled up behind my couch as my neighbors launched fireworks that I realized I had a problem I could not handle. I sought treatment and was eventually discharged from the Navy.

The crisis for veterans is very real. At a time when our government is creating combat veterans exponentially, it is simultaneously diminishing the care facilities. We should be opening VA hospitals, not closing them. Veterans should be able to get care immediately and be offered services through a live contact outreach program, and finally there should be seamless transition from the Department of Defense to the VA. By this last comment I mean that records should be transferred and much of the burden of proof left to the DoD, not the individual to substantiate a claim, because the individual will often be re-traumatized by the experience.

I am before you today representing a 250-member national veterans organization, Iraq Veterans Against the War. We were formed in August 2004 with the following goals. First, we advocate for an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. Forces from Iraq. Second, we want full, mandatory funding for the VA to care for all veterans eligible for services. Finally, we want funding available for the Iraqi people to rebuild their country. This can be easily accomplished legislatively. A bill meeting these requirements would be laid out in the following manner:

1. We express the intent of the United States that all U.S. forces will be withdrawn from Iraq within thirty days and from the theatre of operations within one hundred and eighty days.
2. Funding for the VA will be mandatory and a one time immediate emergency supplemental appropriation will be made to prepare the agency for the returning veterans. A study can then be conducted to determine an accurate figure to operate and strengthen the administration.
3. A supplemental budget will be determined for the nation of Iraq to pay the costs of reconstruction. The allocation will be paid annually for a period of ten years. This allows the Iraqi people to determine what their nation should look like and how they will rebuild it.