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Edwards Calls for Quick End to Training Effort in Iraq

By [MICHAEL R. GORDON](#)

SIOUX CITY, Iowa — [John Edwards](#) says that if elected president he would withdraw the American troops who are training the Iraqi army and police as part of a broader plan to remove virtually all American forces within 10 months.

Mr. Edwards, the former senator from North Carolina who is waging a populist campaign for the Democratic nomination, said that extending the American training effort in [Iraq](#) into the next presidency would require the deployment of tens of thousands of troops to provide logistical support and protect the advisers.

“To me, that is a continuation of the occupation of Iraq,” he said in a 40-minute interview on Sunday aboard his campaign bus as it rumbled through western Iowa.

In one of his most detailed discussions to date about how he would handle Iraq as president, Mr. Edwards staked out a position that would lead to a more rapid and complete troop withdrawal than his principal rivals, Senators [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) and [Barack Obama](#), who have indicated they are open to keeping American trainers and counterterrorism units in Iraq.

[Elizabeth Edwards](#), his wife and political partner, who listened in on the interview from a seat across the aisle, intervened at the end of the session to underscore that Mr. Edwards did not intend to stop all training and was prepared to train Iraqi forces outside of the country. Mr. Edwards continued the theme while acknowledging that the benefits of such training would be limited.

Mr. Edwards’s plan, like that of many of his Democratic opponents, is at odds with the strategy developed by American military commanders, who have said the situation is still too fragile to set a timetable for such extensive troop withdrawals and a curtailment of the training effort in Iraq.

Mr. Edwards’s plan calls for immediately withdrawing 40,000 to 50,000 troops. Nearly all of the remaining American troops would be removed within 9 or 10 months. The only force that would remain would be a 3,500-to-5,000-strong contingent that would protect the American Embassy and possibly humanitarian workers.

Over the past five years, Mr. Edwards’s position on Iraq has undergone a substantial evolution. In 2002, as a senator, Mr. Edwards was among the Democrats who voted to authorize the use of force in Iraq. Mr. Edwards has said he was convinced by the intelligence that [Saddam Hussein](#) controlled stocks of unconventional weapons, but in the Senate speech explaining his vote he also endorsed the Bush administration’s argument that a new democratic Iraq “could serve as a model for the entire Arab world.”

In November 2005, Mr. Edwards wrote an op-ed article for The Washington Post entitled “The Right Way in Iraq,” in which he argued that his earlier vote to authorize the use of force in Iraq was a mistake, while making the

point that it was still important to provide American troops with “a way to end their mission honorably.”

Toward this end, Mr. Edwards called at the time for establishing a more effective program to train Iraqi troops and channeling reconstruction work to Iraqis instead of American contractors. While he called for removing a significant number of American forces, he also emphasized that the withdrawals should be “a gradual process.”

“That will still leave us with enough military capability, combined with better-trained Iraqis, to fight terrorists and continue to help the Iraqis develop a stable country,” he wrote.

In the interview on Sunday, Mr. Edwards said that he decided on his current plan for a rapid and near-total withdrawal of American troops because of the failure of Iraqi leaders to achieve a political accommodation over the past four years. Eight to 10 brigades, which is likely to be the bulk of the American combat force by the time the next president takes office, would immediately be withdrawn.

“I absolutely believe this to my soul: we are there propping up their bad behavior,” he said. “I mean really, how many American lives and how much American taxpayer money are we going to continue to expend waiting for these political leaders to do something? Because that is precisely what we are doing.”

Such a troop withdrawal, he said, might jolt Iraqi leaders into taking action to overcome their sectarian differences. During the 10 months or so while American troops were being withdrawn, Mr. Edwards added, he would also mount an intensive effort to encourage Iraq’s leaders to engage in political reconciliation and solicit the cooperation of Iran and Syria, who he argued might be more willing to help once they understood that American troops were on their way out.

Mr. Edwards, who has never visited Iraq, said he asked the Pentagon last year to help arrange a visit but was turned down. (Mr. Obama visited Iraq once two years ago, while Mrs. Clinton has made three trips.) Geoff Morrell, the senior Defense Department spokesman, said the Pentagon had turned down all requests to visit Iraq from politicians who are not currently serving in Congress or as governors, including [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#), a candidate for the Republican nomination.

At his campaign stops on Sunday, Mr. Edwards sought to highlight his knowledge of foreign policy by recounting his recent telephone call with Pakistan’s president, [Pervez Musharraf](#), a conversation Mr. Edwards initiated as soon as he learned of the death of [Benazir Bhutto](#). Iraq was not part of his prepared remarks, save for a denunciation of greedy military contractors. But Mr. Edwards outlined his plan to remove American troops from Iraq during a question-and-answer session with voters.

In the interview, Mr. Edwards spoke comfortably about the subject and without notes or help from policy advisers. Some elements of his plan, however, run counter to assessments by intelligence agencies, military officers and a Congressionally mandated study.

American military commanders have publicly cautioned that a rapid withdrawal of troops risks a new escalation of sectarian violence, which has been substantially reduced in recent months. A [National Intelligence Estimate](#) on Iraq that was issued in January 2007 by the United States intelligence agencies also warned that the withdrawal of American troops over the ensuing 12 to 18 months would probably lead to “massive civilian casualties and forced population displacement.”

Mr. Edwards acknowledged that there was a risk that a speedy troop drawdown might lead to substantially increased sectarian violence. Under Mr. Edwards's plan, the United States would keep a quick reaction force in Kuwait and perhaps Jordan to respond to terrorist threats and possible "genocide."

Mr. Edwards has said that he would also seek to involve other allied nations in the effort. But he declined to say whether the United States would be prepared to send troops back into Iraq to stop attacks on civilians if other nations did not participate, stating the question was hypothetical.

Regarding training, an independent commission that was established by Congress to assess Iraq's security forces cautioned in a September report that Iraq's security force would not be able to operate independently within the next 12 to 18 months. The commission, whose chairman was the retired Gen. [James L. Jones](#), the former Marine Corps commandant and [NATO](#) commander, noted that the Iraqi army was making strides but added that "for the foreseeable future" Iraqi troops would continue to rely on American help with logistics, equipment, training and support from air and artillery units.

That raises the question of whether Mr. Edwards's plan to withdraw American trainers and logistical support would undermine the effort to transfer more responsibility to Iraqis, which is the main goal of his policy. Asked about the commission's study, Mr. Edwards said that the key problem in shifting responsibility to the Iraqis was not military, but political.

As the interview drew to a close, Mrs. Edwards politely chided this reporter for failing to ask about Mr. Edwards's plan to train some Iraqi forces outside Iraq, which she emphasized was an important feature of the plan. "It's the one thing you forgot," she said.

Mr. Edwards continued the thought. "Of course, it is limited," he said, referring to the training. "You can do some. You can do some."

Throughout his campaign Mr. Edwards has spoken about the need to restore the United States' moral standing in the world. He was asked if he believes the United States has a duty to help protect Iraqi civilians, particularly since he had voted to authorize an invasion that had unleashed a sectarian struggle for power.

"That is a very important question for the president of the United States because it is very much a judgment call," Mr. Edwards said. "Do I believe that we have had a moral responsibility? I do. The question is, How long does that moral responsibility continue and at what juncture is it the right decision to end what we have been doing and shift that responsibility to them?"

"Let's assume for a minute that come January 2009 we still have a significant troop presence in Iraq, which I think is likely," Mr. Edwards added. "If that is the case, then I think another 9 to 10 months of American troop involvement and expenditure of taxpayer money with an intense effort to resolve the political conflict and intense diplomacy, then at that point America has done what it can do."

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