



**Policy Address and Student Led Forum on Iraq War
Congressman Ike Skelton, House Armed Services Committee Chairman
April 3, 2007
Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri**

**BEYOND IRAQ:
AMERICA MUST REMAIN THE INDISPENSABLE NATION**

Sixty one years ago, on this very stage, Sir Winston Churchill famously proclaimed that, "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent." That simple phrase, upon which he went on to elaborate so elegantly, encapsulated the unifying principle of a grand strategic vision – a vision that was to guide our country, and his, for the next fifty years. The translation of strategic vision into effective operational decisions is enormously difficult to develop – even Churchill himself failed miserably on occasion – he was one of the architects of the disastrous British campaign in 1915 as they tried to go ashore at Gallipoli during the Dardanelles campaign.

Claiming to be able to predict the future is for madmen and oracles; the rest of us just have to make do with what little judgment and wisdom we may have picked up over the years, and hope that we're closer to right than wrong. It's an impossible task because the future is undefined - there are a whole range of possibilities out there. Some are more desirable than others. While it is impossible to describe with any certainty exactly where we will be in 5 or 25 or 50 years, I think it is useful to think about the sort of qualities we'd like our future to possess and the types of pitfalls we would chose to avoid. In other words, while it is impossible to predict our destination, we can influence the path we take, so that in the end, we arrive some place we like. That's what strategic vision is really about

But today it is especially difficult. The horizon is clouded by the smoke rising from Iraq; it stings the eyes and blocks attempts to look beyond that conflict. It has consumed not only our precious blood and treasure in amounts far greater than anybody ever predicted, but also, in many respects, our imagination, our faith, and our hope. Those are costs that few consider when they try to render an accounting for our misadventure in Iraq, but they are very real nonetheless. Those costs are the result of so many irretrievable mistakes made by this administration, the realization of which

was reflected when both the House and Senate adopted recent resolutions calling for the redeployment of our troops.

So, when we contemplate the future beyond Iraq, we should also consider how to recapture those things about America that spark imaginations, renew faith, and give hope. I'm going to talk about some of those things today, because it is well past time that we give serious consideration to where we want to be and who we want to be when at last we put the war in Iraq behind us.

Looking beyond Iraq, even as we acknowledge that the future is unknowable, we can see clear near-term challenges emerging. First and most immediate is Afghanistan, which I have been calling the "forgotten war" for some time now. We have under resourced that war for too long; the renewed Taliban is gathering strength, and the Spring Offensive is now upon us. These trends are not good and we, along with our NATO partners, must reverse them very soon. If we don't, not only the future of Afghanistan, and but also the NATO alliance is in jeopardy.

Then, there is the larger problem of Islamic extremism. This war of ideas will not be won on the battlefield; to say a geographic place is the "central front" in the war on terror is to misunderstand its nature entirely.

But, even beyond today's pressing problems, the world remains a dangerous and unpredictable place. Until recently, I would have started off this list with China. China remains to me our biggest challenge in the long run, and the straits of Taiwan are a dangerous place. Today, however, I think Iran, with its pursuit of nuclear weapons and aggressive actions in the Gulf and in support of the insurgents in Iraq, deserves first mention. Continue our trip around the globe and you won't get very far before you reach another area of concern. North Korea is a huge challenge. The greater Middle East is worrisome. Israel and Palestine. Syria. Lebanon. The House of Saud. Even Egypt. When we reach South Asia, we find India and Pakistan, two nuclear powers staring at each other across the Line of Control. In our own hemisphere, we've got Venezuela, with President Chavez to worry about. Haiti is a concern. Cuba's Castro cannot hang on forever. Narco-terrorists continue to pose in Columbia. The tri-border region, where Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina meet has a potential to develop into a safe haven for terrorists. It goes on.

The point to this litany is that the international security situation is fluid; on the one hand, we've got to hedge against strategic surprise, and on the other, we should be working to identify trends that bear watching now. Early identification of evolving challenges and timely engagement using the

full range of national power will save us considerable grief in the future. While the wars we're fighting today demand our focus, we need to be careful that we don't become so near-sighted that we fail to see what's developing around us. We are going to need to take some important steps if we are to ensure the future of our nation over the long-term - say the next thirty to fifty years - is a bright one. We must remain engaged in shaping the global environment. That means we are going to have to take some significant steps in restoring the international community's confidence in the United States after how we have handled Iraq, and the attending problems like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. We must ensure that our alliances remain strong, and evolve as our security environment evolves. This is particularly true regarding the continuing health and future of NATO, but other partnerships will suggest themselves in the future, and we must be open to considering them as they appear. And we will need to take some proactive steps to maintain a positive presence throughout the world, whether that be through maintaining a robust naval presence, which this nation has done historically but today will require a larger Navy or through training and equipping the security forces of friendly nations to enable them to be more active partners in the war on terror.

So these are the challenges that confront us. These and plenty more yet unimagined. Generally, in the strategic sense, "challenges" are a euphemism for "conflicts" when people talk about future interactions with rival groups or nations. We anticipate conflicts because we anticipate that our image of the world and our place in it will somehow collide with our challenger's image of their world. How and when that collision happens and how it is resolved is the great test for our future generations.

But pay careful attention - because these collisions come about because of competing world images, we would do well to thoughtfully consider the answer to the question, "what is our place in this world." Strategic vision, you see, is not only about looking out toward the future. It is about self-reflection as well. How we answer that critical question should be the single unifying principle under which we organize the full range of our national priorities - our diplomatic effort, our economic engines, our own domestic priorities as well. In short, how we act with and react to the rest of the world in every facet.

Great leaders like Winston Churchill, or Harry Truman, were recognized as extraordinary not only because they lead their nations through war, but because they mobilized nations, economies, and peoples. If the United States is to continue to be a great nation, we must attend to all the elements of that greatness. We do not wish to be consigned to the dustbin of history, after all. It has been said before the United States is the

indispensable nation. That is so, and I believe that we should aspire that it remains so. History has shown us what happens when we disengage from the world. It took us two world wars to learn that lesson, but we understood it well enough to win the Cold War. Indispensable, however, is not and need not become synonymous with “all pervasive” or “domineering.” Certainly, we are an engine of the world’s economy, and our fortunes in that sense are inextricably intertwined with the rest of the planets’.

But how else should we think about it? I believe we should strive to be indispensable not in the sense where others must seek our permission to act but rather because they desire our approval for their actions. We should strive to be indispensable not in the sense that we require compliance with our demands but rather because we inspire by our standards. We should strive to be indispensable not because we insist on patronage, but because we offer generosity. And, we should strive to be indispensable not because our wrath is to be feared, but because our strength is to be valued.

Moreover, we should aspire to rise to a place where we feel confident enough to understand that the term “challenge,” even in the international context, need not always have an adversarial meaning. In our daily life we are challenged by those around us and we come out the better for it. We are challenged by our professors to be better students. We are challenged by our coaches to be better athletes. We are challenged by our clergy to be better people and we are challenged by our spouses to be better partners. All of these relationships help refine us, and in so doing, enriches our lives so that all benefit. We should see many of our international challenges in much the same way. Where, for example, a rival nation might challenge us for influence in Africa or South America, we should take that as an opportunity to refine the good things about America so that we are the obvious choice. Are we really the guarantor of liberty and natural ally against tyranny? Do we provide the best economic and social opportunities for all peoples with whom we interact? In the free market place of ideas, is the United States clearly superior? We need not see that as a challenge solely with a rival! That’s a challenge within ourselves!

To do all of this – reclaim our place as the indispensable nation, with all that the term represents, and to chart a course that shapes the future into something we would wish for our children and grandchildren requires first the strategic vision to imagine it, and then a concerted national effort across the entire spectrum of our endeavors to make it so. It will require a robust economy that provides opportunities for our citizens while connecting with the rest of the world in productive partnerships. It will require a domestic agenda that enables all of our citizens to realize their full potential and remains the shining beacon of hope for the rest of the world. It will require

a national security strategy that seeks to engage the world in a manner that will help shape the future in the way we would make it so, deter those who would otherwise seek opportunities to challenge that vision in a negative way, and when necessary defeat those that would threaten the security of our homeland or our national interests.

Providing for our national security, today and in the future, is an essential part of any national strategic vision. We do not know what world we're going to face, but we know we will need a strong military and an effective defensive posture. During the 30 years that I have had the honor to serve in Congress, this country has used military force on 12 separate occasions. None of these actions were planned years in advance, and in most cases the United States was forced to act with little warning. That lesson drives my present concern about the readiness of U.S. forces and their ability to deter, deploy, and defeat potential adversaries of the United States.

"The most critical task in safeguarding our effort to realize our vision, therefore, is to attend to the readiness of our forces. Readiness is about having the right people, in the right numbers, and providing them with the best leadership and educational opportunities available. It is about forces that are properly equipped, and thoroughly trained for any contingency. It is also about ensuring that those trained and ready forces are aligned with the proper set of roles and missions. And, it is about being able to bring all our elements of national power to bear. This extends well beyond military power to encompass the full range of governmental activities as well. In short, it is about reducing strategic risk.

Today, this is first and foremost an issue for our land forces. It is clear that the stress of continuous operations in Iraq and Afghanistan is rupturing the Army, and putting the Marine Corps under great strain. It is equally clear that the types of conflicts in which we will find ourselves will require a robust, full spectrum ground force. I do recognize and am grateful for the considerable contributions to our national defense that the Navy brings to the seas and the Air Force brings to our skies and space, but today the readiness of our ground forces is of pressing concern. Today few Americans may recall the story of Task Force Smith, the first American troops sent to repel North Korea's invasion of South Korea during the summer of 1950. Under-manned, under-equipped, and under-trained, the soldiers of Task Force Smith were unprepared for the attack that came their way. As a result, the unit suffered terrible casualties and the Americans endured a humiliating retreat to the Pusan Perimeter. Those soldiers and our nation learned the hard way that sending unready forces to war can have disastrous consequences.

The Army has degraded to a point where there is a risk of mission failure should a new crisis emerge. This is an intolerable situation. We must set about the task of rebuilding it, but rebuilding it to the way it was will not be enough. As we reset it, it must evolve so that it develops the resident capabilities required to conduct the full range of missions that it will face in the coming years: high intensity combat, to be sure, but also counter-insurgency missions like those that have bedeviled us in Iraq and Afghanistan, and also stability, support, transition and reconstruction activities.

This will require a sustained commitment for years. Congress needs to put money to fix and refill the stocks of equipment. But we also need to mobilize this nation and its industrial base to make more capacity for repair and rebuilding available faster. This will not be a simple task. The American industries supporting the American military don't look like they did during World War II. This should require the creation of a cross-cutting Defense Readiness Production Board to identify solutions to critical military readiness shortfalls. Bold action is needed, but American patriotism and ingenuity are equal to the task. We must mobilize both to ensure that our military is reset to a place where it can confidently respond to any situation at low risk to those who serve.

But while that sort of action is vital, in the end that is really just a matter of rolling up our sleeves and setting ourselves to the task. Growing the size of the Army – something I have called for since 1995 - will help take some of the stress off our soldiers, but we must reverse the trend in recruiting. The Army is granting waivers for moral turpitude, drug use, medical issues, criminal records, and high school diplomas at a record pace. I have spent a lot of time thinking about how to carry this message to the American people. Since I do not believe the youth of America is unwilling or incapable of serving our country, I tend to think that our country's leaders are not making a clear and compelling argument about why they should.

Community leaders at all levels, not just the recruiters in our neighborhoods, have a responsibility to ask our young people to serve our country. When we ask young men and women to volunteer, we must be able to explain to them and to their families why their service is so necessary. The issue is no longer just about what is good for the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. This is about what is good for the long term health and security of our nation. We need to increase the size of our forces and populate them with high quality people at a time when Americans' tendency to serve in the military is on the decline. We must turn that around.

To be ready for whatever comes in the future, if we are to remain the indispensable nation, we must have an effective and efficient military. In light of recent conflicts, we are overdue to consider of the roles and missions with which we charge the military services. Each should be properly postured to provide the full range of capabilities the joint force requires, without developing redundant capabilities that waste scarce defense resources. Today, we are seeing the development of capabilities in some services that have traditionally resided in others. Some of this has been out of necessity. Air Force personnel have performed valiantly in Iraq doing jobs that would be normally performed by the Army, such as driving trucks and providing convoy security, were the Army not stretched so thin. Still, the idea of naval infantry, for example, seems curious in light of the Marine Corps traditional role. One can't help but see the Army's desire for intra-theater airlift as a sort of regression when one considers that the Air Force grew into a separate service from its origins as the Army Air Corps in the first place. It is natural that the changing nature of the modern battlefield, combined with the development of new technologies should drive the services to identify emerging requirements for new capabilities, but we should be very careful about how we structure the joint force to procure and deliver those capabilities to the war fighter.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, there is the matter in how we approach interagency reform. I say most importantly because we will only improve our alliances, avoid conflict, and take advantages of opportunities if we are making use of all parts of our American strength – everything that makes this nation great. As incredible as our military is, it cannot do all things, and the other parts of our government need some work. When we look at where we are in Iraq today, and where we are in Afghanistan, the root of many of our problems lie in the fact that we are unable to bring much of our national power to bear on the challenges confronting us there. Even now, we need teams of diplomats, development experts, and other specialists in fields such as rule of law, engineering, and agribusiness to accompany our soldiers in the task of rebuilding Iraq and Afghanistan. But the State Department and the other agencies you would expect to play a significant role cannot deliver experts in the numbers required, and so our soldiers have had to take up the slack. The same is true in Afghanistan. Our troops do all that we ask of them, but their career has not properly prepared them for this role. Despite their best efforts, we see sub optimized results.

The historians among you may remember that I pushed hard to make the military more joint back 1986. It took Congress a long time to pass that legislation, known as the Goldwater-Nichols Act. It took even longer for the Department of Defense and the Services to embrace and implement it.

Despite the naysayers' then, we can see its value everyday now. It's time to take on an issue that will be a hundred times more difficult – an interagency reform of even greater magnitude. I'm convinced such a reform can more effectively bring all the instruments of national power to bear on the challenges we face in Iraq, Afghanistan, the global war on terror, and even here in homeland security today. Even more importantly though, I hope such an effort will increase our nation's capacities to face unanticipated challenges in the future.

Churchill stood upon this stage all of those years ago, and laid before the entire world a strategic vision that set the course of this nation and our allies for years to come. He got it about right, and that was not an easy thing to do. Today, we are at an equally precarious point in history, the future clouded by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Still, we are the nation of great promise. The vision we exercise and the choices we make today will have a profound effect on the way things unfold tomorrow. If we are to remain the world's indispensable nation, we ought to take the time to discuss what that means to us and then work to make it so. It will take a sustained effort and agility as we deal with the unexpected. You all will be the ones picking up the banner to make those decisions and ensure that the United States remains the indispensable nation. Looking out at you today, I have great faith in our future and great faith in you."