



Activist Toolkit

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Talking Points on Iraq for Activists

Download our full messaging guide at
<http://www.peaceactionwest.org/downloads/NSLBMessageGuide6-08.pdf>

- In recent polls, 64% of Americans said they want US troops withdrawn from Iraq by some time in 2008. Fifty-seven percent said that Congress should have the final say on troop levels in Iraq, not President Bush.
- The occupation is providing political cover for groups that are attacking fellow Iraqis. A withdrawal of troops is more likely to reduce violence than increase it.
- To stabilize Iraq and protect U.S. troops, we need a timeline for withdrawal, funding for reconstruction, regional diplomatic initiatives, and a prohibition of the building of permanent bases in Iraq.
- Some argue that a timeline will allow terrorists to “wait us out.” As Gen. Tony McPeak, member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War, stated, “It’s not a question of whether we’re going to leave Iraq - it’s a question of when. And everybody in Iraq knows that.” It is inevitable that US troops will leave; the best way to avoid greater harm to US soldiers and Iraqis is to leave sooner rather than later.
- Congress is endowed with powers to limit and steer military policy. Members of Congress from both parties have enacted legislation to limit funding and troop deployments, including prohibiting funds from being used to send U.S. troops to Cambodia in 1970 and the Boland Amendment in 1982, which prohibited covert military assistance to Nicaragua.
- The military needs to be removed to allow focus on reconstruction and stabilization, and turn over control of projects to the Iraqi people. A federal agency recently found that seven of the eight reconstruction projects the Bush administration deemed “successes” are no longer functional.
- An Iraq policy where redeployment drags on or where large numbers of troops are left behind will seriously undermine the diplomatic benefits of a military disengagement strategy. Announcing a full withdrawal and beginning it immediately would instantly increase our diplomatic leverage to gain the economic and diplomatic support of regional and international actors. In turn, that leverage could be used to encourage diverse Iraqi factions to come to the table for serious negotiation and reconciliation.
- The war in Iraq will soon cost the US over \$500 billion, and there is no end in sight. That money could have paid for a college education for half of the country’s teenagers or preschool for every 3 and 4 year old in the country for the next eight years. The US should start investing money in programs that will stabilize Iraq, including withdrawal of US troops, reconstruction, and regional diplomacy.
- Benchmarks that penalize the Iraqi people based on the performance of the Iraqi government are counterproductive and are misplacing responsibility for the war in Iraq. The proposed benchmarks, which would withhold economic and reconstruction aid if they are not met, achieve the opposite of what needs to happen in Iraq. Reconstruction must be fully funded and Iraq stabilized for civilians, with the removal of the military presence facilitating that process.

Organize a Meeting with a Member of Congress

Organizing a visit with your member of Congress is easier than you think, and a powerful way to share your views with an office. If you are planning a congressional meeting for the No Soldier Left Behind week of action August 18-22, e-mail Rebecca Griffin, Political Director at rgriffin@peaceactionwest.org, and she will guide you through the process. Here are five easy steps to follow for a successful visit.

1) Schedule your meeting.

Call the district office of your member of Congress and ask for the name and contact information for the local scheduler. Most offices will ask that you fax or email a written visit request. This request should include:

- The date you'd like to meet
- The issues you'd like to discuss
- List of attendees (if you don't know who will attend when you're requesting your meeting, it's good to give a general overview of the group you are planning to bring, e.g. concerned constituents, local faith leaders, union members, veterans)
- Your contact information
- See page 5 for a sample scheduling request

To increase your chances of getting a meeting, propose a range of available dates. The No Soldier Left Behind week of congressional action will be the week of 8/18, so start by asking for a meeting sometime that week. Send your request at least 3 weeks in advance, and call to follow up about a week after you send it.

If your representative of senator isn't available, it's still very useful to meet with a member of his or her staff.

2) Build your team.

Even before you send your visit request, you should have in mind 2-4 people who live in the district that you'd like to bring on the visit. To the best of your ability, try to gather people who represent different interests in the community (parent, faith leader, union member, etc.). If you have your team assembled before sending the visit scheduling letter, include their names and affiliations in your letter. A good visit should include no more than 4-5 people speaking, though you can bring additional people for support. You should check with the scheduler to find out how many people the meeting room can accommodate. Make sure everyone on your visit team is willing to stay on topic and share the floor with your group. If you have people interested in coming who are unable to attend, have them write letters and deliver them as part of your meeting.

3) Prepare and practice.

A good congressional visit starts with good research. Know where your representative or senator stands on the issues you plan to discuss, and briefly research his or her background. Check his or her website for their most recent statement on the issue. [Click here](#) to find your representative's voting record and cosponsorship of important legislation.

Make sure your team meets before the visit, even if it's just an hour before the meeting. Decide who will cover what points, and who will take notes. It can be helpful to have everyone practice his or her part of the meeting so everyone feels comfortable and prepared, and the meeting will go as smoothly as possible. Remember that you're trying to persuade your representative or senator to take action, so use arguments targeted at him/her, based on his/her voting record and personal background. For example, if the representative comes from a health care background,

you could mention the poor service our veterans receive or list some health care organizations opposed to the war. It's good to bring one to two articles supporting your points; they should be short and from well-respected sources.

Be clear on what your group will be asking for, based on your member of Congress' record on the war in Iraq. Have your "ask" written down for everyone's reference. While it is important that you convey the general reasons your community is against the war, the real accountability comes from asking your representative to take a clear action. Make sure it is something your member of Congress can do (for instance, don't ask a representative to cosponsor a Senate bill). The clearest asks are usually to vote a certain way on an upcoming bill or to cosponsor a piece of legislation. If your member of Congress is already doing these things, you can ask for something different like a speech, press release, or opinion editorial outlining a clear strategy for ending the war in Iraq. You will probably not get a definite answer, especially if you meet with a staff person, but asking clearly for something specific gives you an action to follow up on and a way to measure the success of your grassroots efforts.

4) Get the most out of your visit.

The day before your visit, call the office to confirm. Be sure to show up 5-10 minutes early, and dress professionally. It's often a good idea to have your team meet somewhere near the office 45 minutes to an hour before the meeting.

Start the visit on a positive note, even if the member of Congress has a bad voting record on foreign policy. Be polite, and thank them for taking the time to meet. Try to build a connection or common ground, even if it's small talk—for example, the fact that you went to the same high school as the representative is enough to build a more positive meeting.

Your job in the visit is to get as much information as you give. Listen carefully, take good notes, and ask good questions. Usually the representative or his/her staff person won't make a firm commitment in the meeting—that's okay. Grassroots advocacy is an ongoing process and real action on their part will require follow-up on yours. Again, even if you strongly disagree with the representative or senator, remain polite—don't interrupt and don't be disrespectful. The goal of the meeting is to build a bridge with the office, not burn one.

5) Evaluate, follow-up and plan next steps.

After the meeting, take 5-10 minutes with your team to evaluate the visit. What went well? What points resonated the most? What follow up is needed? Be sure to send a thank you note to the office within a few days after the meeting. If you promised to send additional information, send it ASAP. Follow up with a phone call 2-3 weeks after the visit to check-in on actions you requested.

6) Report back

Send your notes, photos, stories and more to rgriffin@peaceactionwest.org and post them to your local meetup.com group.

Sample scheduling request letter:

[Scheduler]
Office of Representative [Name]
[Local Address]

[date]

Dear Mr/Ms [Scheduler],

I am writing to request a half-hour meeting with Representative [name] any time [range of dates].

I am a constituent of Representative [name] and am involved in [church groups, community org, etc].

I would like to meet with Representative [name] to discuss my concerns about [issue-war in Iraq, situation with Iran, etc]. I will be joined at the meeting by [names and affiliations of other people coming on the visit].

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

[Your name, phone number, email and address]

How to stump a politician (a.k.a. How to “Bird-dog”)

Birddogging: What is it?

It's a tactic that activists use to get politicians on the record. “Birddoggers” show up at candidates' and politicians' events and ask pointed questions about the issues they feel most need attention. There is an art to being an effective birddogger, and it includes everything from standing in the right spot to coming up with rhetoric-busting questions that politicians can't evade. See our 8 tips to become an expert birddogger, as well as our sample questions on Iraq. (WARNING: This tipsheet features very low-budget videos).

8 tips to be an expert bird-dogger

1. Spot your targets.

Find out who the representatives and senators are for your area, and who will be running against them in November. The entire House of Representatives is up for reelection, as well as a third of the Senate, so there will probably be challengers as well as current members of Congress making appearances in your area. The presidential candidates are doing fewer intimate events, but it's good to keep an eye out for town hall meetings and fundraisers where you can get an opportunity to pose your questions on ending the war in Iraq.

2. Find out where the candidate will be.

Try to get your information straight from the candidates' offices—call them, join their e-mail lists, and check their websites. If you have media contacts, you might be able to get information from friendly journalists, or those with a progressive point of view. Also, if you're a member of a political club, the candidates or officials may come to you. Stay up-to-date with local newspapers and political websites, because they often publish calendars of candidate events. Often these events are publicized last minute or are not widely advertised, so it's important to use multiple avenues to get this information. Find out as much about each event as you can, so you know what to expect ahead of time.

3. Get to know the candidates.

The more you know a candidate's views on the issues, the better prepared you will be for his or her appearance in your area. Check www.peaceactionwest.org for voting records of current members of Congress. Look at their websites, ask for position papers from the campaign office or directly question the staff, and follow the campaign in the local papers to glean candidate positions. Google news alerts are an easy way to get information delivered right to your inbox. Integrate their positions into your questions!

4. Work in teams.

Bird-doggers often find it easier to work in teams. Bird-dogging can be really challenging, so going in teams of two or more will create a support base. It will also allow you to share responsibilities, resources and most importantly keep you focused. Your team can help you discuss issues, come up with good strategies and share concerns with like-minded friends. It also increases the chance that your questions about ending the war in Iraq will be asked. Recruit friends and family to join you in your campaign.

5. Prep your questions ahead of time.

The perfect question becomes the central part of an effective bird-dogging campaign. The better the questions are, the better the answer will be. You will need to have your questions ready before the event. That way you'll be the first with your hand in the air, while every one else is thinking of what they want to ask. Make a list of questions and prioritize them, so if only 1-2 people in your group are picked you'll still be able to ask the most important questions. Click [here](#) for sample questions and tips on writing good questions.

6. At the Event.

- *Be proactive.* If you aren't called on during the event, you still have some opportunities. For instance, make sure you get to the "handshake line" so you can ask your question while the candidate is interacting with the crowd. It is especially important to get these kinds of interactions on tape.

In fact, some of our organizers have perfected the classic bird-dogger "handshake" demonstrated in the video: firmly holding the candidate in place with one (cordial) hand, a recording device in the other, and a pointed question at the ready.

- *Get there early.* Make sure you grab the best position(s) in the room and check around to talk to and get a feel for the other people there. It's good to have people positioned in several key areas: near the media, on the path the candidate is likely to take through the audience, and spread out within the audience to increase the likelihood of being called on.
- *Always keep it cordial.* You will get a better response from candidates, and make a positive impression on the media, if you are calm and respectful. Hardly anyone will be 100 percent opposed to your views, so try to come up with a compliment on a candidate's position that you can mention before you ask your question.
- *Maximize your question's impact.* Think about the likely responses to your question before you ask it. If you anticipate the candidate's response, you can be ready with a follow-up question that will dig deeper and keep the candidate from avoiding the answer. Polite persistence is a key skill in being an effective bird-dogger.
- *Make a lasting impression.* Wear No Soldier Left Behind t-shirts and bring signs if allowed, so the candidate gets the picture that a lot of people want to know where he or she stands on the war in Iraq. It's good to have some members of your team go incognito in case they don't want to call on people who are clearly with the campaign.
- *Record your interaction.* The best way to build accountability around your bird-dogging is to get a video of the interaction. This prevents the candidate from being able to backtrack, and distribution of the video on the Internet can generate lots of attention for the candidate (good or bad) and the issue. Cell phones are great for video, photos or audio, because they are unobtrusive. If you don't have a video camera, make sure someone is taking notes. Photos are great too.

7. Talk to the Media.

Getting media coverage of your question can greatly increase the impact of your bird-dogging. Since the reporters work under deadlines, they often cover the most convenient aspects of a story. Introduce yourself to the reporters in the room to increase the likelihood that your questions will be highlighted. Be prepared with soundbites about your question or why you attended the event and try to position yourself near reporters and TV cameras.

8. Report back to Peace Action West.

Whenever you interact with a candidate or the media, especially if you've gotten a juicy response from a candidate, don't keep it to yourself! The work you are doing, and the information you are gathering is incredibly valuable. When you share your experience with us, we can help share it with the widest audience possible. Post your video, photos and the information you've gathered to your Meetup group and our MeetupAlliance. We'll highlight your work on the Peace Action West blog, website and in email alerts. If you are not signed up with one of our Meetups, then email your information to Rebecca Griffin, Political Director at rgriffin@peaceactionwest.org.

Organize a Phone Bank

Invite your friends and neighbors.

While you can certainly make effective calls to voters on your own, it is often more fun and productive to call in groups. Some of the best times to make phone calls are after dinnertime on a weekday or on weekend afternoons. Working together helps keep morale up through lots of calls, and allows you to share tips and learn from each other. It's also an opportunity to make it a fun social event—have a potluck, play games, use your creativity to make it fun and enjoyable while also having a strong political impact.

Know who your target is.

Focus on a member of Congress who you are trying to get to take a specific action to end the war on Iraq. Make sure you are only calling people who live in that district. Members of Congress are concerned with getting reelected, so they want to know what their potential voters think about important issues. E-mail Rebecca Griffin at rgriffin@peaceactionwest.org to get lists of voters to call in your target district.

Get organized.

Before people meet up, should to have all the materials ready for them. Each person needs:

- A “rap” that he or she can read from when making calls. (See page 9 for a sample rap)
- A pen or pencil
- A phone to call on. It works great to ask people to bring their cell phones.
- A comfortable place to sit.
- Enough space to have a phone conversation without disturbing or being disturbed by other callers.
- A list of people to call

You should provide a list of people to call that is reasonable for the amount of time you have. There should be space on the call sheets for people to write down what happened (not home, said no, said yes). That way you know if you didn't reach people in case you want to try calling them again another time. You want to be especially careful to record the number of yeses so you can see if you met your goals and celebrate your success!

Finally, make sure the materials are split up so you don't call the same people more than once.

Prepare your team.

Before everyone starts calling, spend 10-15 minutes briefing the volunteers. Fill them in on information that will help make the calls more effective: the political climate, background information on your target, what you want to achieve with the calls, an explanation of the rap, and how to keep track of the calls. Throughout the night, check in and work to keep people motivated. It can be frustrating to get hung up on or talk to people who don't want to take action, and that can start to show in people's voices. As the leader, you want to make sure you are keeping people politically motivated and having fun.

Have a concise "rap" and a clear "ask".

Provide people with something simple and brief to say on the phone that also conveys the urgency of taking action. It usually works best to have this written down in the form of a script. You should also make sure that there is something specific you want the voters to ask for when they call their representative's office.

Set goals

Having specific goals about how many calls you want to generate can help keep people motivated and excited throughout the phone bank. You can find fun ways to acknowledge successful calls (like everyone rings a bell when they get a yes) and to keep track of your progress (have a chart on the wall that shows the number of “yeses” growing throughout the day).

Practice.

Calling strangers can make people a little bit nervous, so it’s good to do some role-playing together before you start calling. Have people practice in pairs or in front of the group pretending to play each role. That way people have had the experience of talking through it and all the calls will be more effective.

One of the most important things to practice is having assumptive and confident tone, which is critical in getting busy people to take some time to talk. You can also practice challenging situations that might come up, such as the person on the phone saying she doesn’t have time to talk.

Wrap up and thanks.

First of all, thank your volunteers for their efforts and celebrate the impact you’ve had with your successful phone bank!

Report back!

Our political impact becomes more real when we see how it fits in to the larger effort to end the war. E-mail Rebecca Griffin with your success stories, numbers, stories and photos from your phone bank. Then we can share with the rest of the network and inspire others to take action. Rebecca’s email is rgriffin@peaceactionwest.org

Sample Iraq Call to Action Script

Different arguments and talking points will work better for different audiences, so you should adjust this “rap” based on what you know about your local community. This can serve as a template, and includes key elements: a brief problem and proposed solution, strong language and a sense of urgency.

Hi, my name is _____ and I’m a volunteer with No Soldier Left Behind. I’m calling you with a quick action to end the war in Iraq. Do you have a moment?

[If they are busy]: I understand. We need to get as much pressure on your representative as possible today. This will only take 90 seconds. Will that work?

Many members of Congress think we need to sit around and wait for a new president to take a stand against the war in Iraq. The American people are fed up and want to see the war end now, and we want our representatives in Congress to take action.

Your representative, _____, is not currently supporting a bill in Congress that will build momentum so that the new president will have act right away to end the war. We need to make sure he hears from his voters that we want him to take a stand now. Can I count on your to call Rep. _____ and ask him to cosponsor _____?

Great! Do you have a pen? The phone number for his office is _____. Let them know your address so they know you live in his district and tell them why you want Rep. _____ to cosponsor _____.

Can I get your e-mail address so we can keep you updated about the campaign?

Host a Letter-Writing Party

Most people don't write handwritten letters to Congress very often, which makes letter-writing one way to make your voice stand out to your representative. You can host a letter-writing party to get people to take action while having fun and learning more about ending the war in Iraq. Here are some tips to make your letter-writing party a success:

Find something fun and interesting to draw people in.

Choose one or more of these ideas to incorporate into your party to entice people to come along, or come up with your own creative ideas:

- Have a potluck.
- Show a film about the war in Iraq.
- Bring in a guest speaker who can educate people about some aspect of ending the war.
- Create a fun activity or game to help people get to know each other.

Get people informed and politicized.

One reason it's good to write letters together is so people feel like they are part of something beyond themselves. As the host of the party, it's your job to show people that writing letters is important and effective. Things to share include:

- Who you are writing to and why you're writing to him or her.
- What you're asking for in the letters and why.
- What's going on with the political climate around the war in Iraq and what Congress will be doing in the near future. (For the latest, check out our blog at www.GroundswellOnline.org)
- Why letter-writing works and tips on how to write good letters (see the next section on letter-writing)

Have everything people need to write and send their letters.

Make writing letters as easy as possible for people. You can have everything there or make bringing supplies part of the letter "potluck." Make sure you have:

- Paper
- Pens
- Stamps
- Envelopes
- Sample letters (see the next section for a sample)
- Tips on writing letters

Send people away with more action.

Your party will be even more effective if people leave ready to encourage others to join them in taking actions. Here are a few ideas, but you can come up with your own:

- Give people extra sample letters to give to friends.
- Give them petitions to the president-elect to have signed and return to Peace Action West. You can download a PDF of our petition at <http://www.peaceactionwest.org/downloads/IraqPetition.pdf>
- Encourage them to hold their own letter-writing party.

- Give out copies of this activist toolkit so your friends can plan their own actions.

Get everyone's contact information.

Your letter-writing party can be one step that leads to engagement and more political action if you can follow up with everyone who attended. Make sure you have everyone's phone numbers and e-mail addresses so you can plan other events in the future. If you have a group on meetup.com, facebook or another site, encourage anyone who isn't a member yet to join. If you don't have a group and you're interested in setting one up and joining the Peace Action West Online Alliance, contact Rebecca Griffin at rgriffin@peaceactionwest.org.

Report back.

We want to share your action and successes with others, and be able to tell members of Congress about what you are doing in their districts. Keep track of the number of letters you generate and take photos. Post them to your online group or send them to Rebecca Griffin at rgriffin@peaceactionwest.org so we can share your work and inspire others to take action!

Writing Great Letters to the Editor

The "Letters to the Editor" section is one of the most widely read sections of the newspaper, and can help shape the opinions of both the public and policy makers. We'd love to hear from you if you have suggestions on how to improve these tips, or if they have helped you get a letter published.

Four steps to a great letter

Sentence 1: What was recently in the news that prompted you to write this letter, and what about it moved you to take action? Say it in as few words as you can.

I was dismayed to see today's editorial entitled, "People who oppose the war in Iraq are terrorist loving traitors."

Sentence 2: What is the one, single most important point you want to make?

The fact is that opposition to the war in Iraq often comes from a deep love of our country, and a desire to see our nation's best values reflected in our foreign policy.

Sentence 3: What is at least one fact, observation or personal statement that backs up your point? Personal anecdotes often work great here.

As a mother of two, my own desire for peace is deepened by my commitment to leaving a greater country and a safer world behind for my own children.

Sentence 4: In conclusion, make your point again. It's often effective to call for specific change to help drive your point home, as in the example below where the writer calls for more seriousness and less name-calling.

It's time we all moved past the name-calling and terrorist-baiting, and start looking seriously at what kind of foreign policy is needed to move us all forward as a nation.

More Sample Letters:

Example 1:

Dear Editor,

I am appalled at President Bush's veto of a timeline for withdrawal from Iraq. The facts on the ground in Iraq make it clear that there is no military solution to our problems there. In fact, the polls show that the majority of Americans and Iraqis want US troops out of Iraq. It is about time that Congress stands up to the Bush administration, and this veto should not change that.

Sincerely,

Name, Address

Example 1:

Dear Editor,

Today Sen. McCain wrongly insisted that Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr initiated the ceasefire that calmed the violent clashes that burned Baghdad and Basra. This is just another example of Sen. McCain's habit of getting the facts wrong on Iraq, and coming to enough wrong conclusions to fill an alternate universe.

In McCain's version of events, al-Maliki's US-backed assault on Basra was a success, and the ceasefire al-Sadr's white flag; but in truth al-Maliki's attack failed, and Iraqi officials had to travel to Iran to persuade al-Sadr to rein in his army.

This may possibly be the next commander of the world's most powerful military, and it is critical that the press not give Sen. McCain a free pass on his tenuous grasp of the facts.

Sincerely,

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

More Tips:

- Use legislators' names. If your printed letter mentions a representative or senator by name, be sure to clip it out and send it to them.
- Get to know the tone and style of letters selected by your paper.
- Check the length of the letters your paper publishes. As a rule, shorter is better.
- Use statistics and personal stories when you have them.
- Your letter should be signed and must include your address and telephone number or it won't be published. The paper may call to verify that you wrote the letter.
- Be patient. It may take you several tries to get a letter published, but even unpublished letters have an impact.
- Work with friends or groups. Letter writing is a great group or volunteer activity, and the more letters on a given subject, the greater the chance that one or more will be published.
- Don't rant (not that you would). Hard-hitting criticism is a big plus, but rants won't get published.

Writing Effective Letters to Congress

Excerpted and adapted from a report by the Congressional Management Foundation:

Sending a letter to a member of Congress is not equivalent to casting a ballot or answering a survey, where the choice with the most responses “wins.” It is more like giving a speech at a town meeting or writing a letter to the editor. The content matters. The operating assumption of many congressional staff is that the more thought constituents give to the communication, the more passionately they care about the issue. Quality messages are those that are:

- 1. Personalized.** Even just one relevant and personalized sentence or paragraph in an otherwise generic message conveys some sense of a constituent’s sentiment. The more personalized the message, the better. It significantly helps the communication if one’s personal views, experiences, and the reasons for one’s opinions are included in the message.
- 2. Short.** Congressional staff review hundreds of letters every week, so covering an issue in a few short paragraphs helps them immensely.
- 3. Targeted.** Messages that convey knowledge of specific legislation, the member’s stance on the issue, and the impact the legislation will have on the member’s constituents, district, or state tend to be much more persuasive than generic messages.
- 4. Informative.** Congressional offices do not have the resources to research and track every bill, so they focus on legislation being considered in their members’ committees or by the full House or Senate. Often constituents bring new legislation to their attention, requiring staff to do research so as to be able to discuss and respond to it. For this reason, quality messages contain specific information about the legislation in question.

Letters sent to congressional offices in Washington, DC go through an extensive screening process and can take more than a week to arrive. The most efficient way to get a letter to a member of Congress is to send it to one of his or her district offices.

If an urgent vote is coming up, phone calls to the DC office are the best way to get the message out in time.

SAMPLE LETTER

This letter gives you a good framework to start with. You should also find a specific ask (a vote, piece of legislation, etc.) that is appropriate for your member of Congress.

Dear Rep./Sen. X

I am writing to urge you to oppose any funding for the war in Iraq that is not used to withdraw our troops. After more than five years, we know that strategy in Iraq is failing, and we need to bring our troops home as quickly and safely as possible.

With the long-term costs of the war projected to be more than \$3 trillion, the American people are fed up with the lack of accountability and will support Congress in taking a stand against the Bush administration. As the American and Iraqi casualties continue to rise, we cannot wait for a new president to take action to end the war. I want my tax dollars invested in a smart political strategy that includes regional diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and reconstruction.

I strongly urge you to support a timeline for withdrawal of US troops and to oppose any funding that grants another blank check to the Bush administration to continue its failed strategy.

Please write and let me know what further action you will take on this critical issue.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

Be an Expert Online Activist

Here are some ideas for how you can help us promote a better foreign policy using online advocacy and organizing tools. All you need is a computer (or a fancy cell phone) and an Internet connection.

1) You've already taken action. Now help us spread the word. If you are signed up to receive our email alerts and you are acting on them yourself, you can help us increase the power of our campaigns exponentially by helping get the word out.

2) Respond to and promote relevant news stories. The national conversation on foreign policy increasingly takes place online, which gives activists an opportunity to participate in exciting ways. By responding to events and highlighting important news stories, you can help shape the foreign policy debate.

Here's how

1. Use that forward button! Sure, anyone born after 1990 may tell you that email is "old fashioned," but it's still the most powerful way you can build attention for one of our action alerts.

2. Social networking sites. If you have an account on MySpace, Facebook, Gather, Ning, or one of many other options, you can use your profile page to tell your friends to check out one of our actions. For instance, you can tell your MySpace or Facebook friends to sign our petition to the president-elect to bring the troops home from Iraq.

3. Your blog. Whether your blog (if you have one) is about kittens, plants or politics, you can help by linking to our blog, or by occasionally featuring one of our action alerts.

4. Other people's blogs. Help build the conversation by adding your comments on blog posts that cover foreign policy issues.

5. Social bookmarking sites. Help us out by posting our action alerts on social bookmarking sites like Reddit.com, Digg.com and StumbleUpon.com. This is also a great way to call attention to blog post that cover news that you find important but is ignored by the mainstream press.

6. Organize! Start up a group or forum around a specific campaign or kind of action. The possibilities are endless. One example:

One of our supporters set up an online listserv, news group or forum to generate letters to the editor in response to faulty or incomplete coverage from a news outlet she felt was unaccountable. Her group averaged almost one letter to the editor published in that paper every two weeks! Some options for this are Google Groups and Yahoo Groups.

Another great option is to start an online group under the banner of No Soldier Left Behind! Learn more at www.nosoldierleftbehind.org.

A tip for news junkies

The speed and quantity of information online can be overwhelming. The following tools allows you to filter through the noise and have the news and analysis you choose delivered to you in an easy to digest format. Once you've got that, the next step is to engage in the conversation. (See "4. Other people's blogs" above.)

RSS feeds



RSS feeds provide a way to get instant updates from your favorite news sources or on your priority issues as they go online.

You subscribe to an RSS feed by clicking on this orange symbol above that, if available, will most often appear next to the url at the top of your browser window. All blogs, most news outlets and many websites offer RSS feeds on their sites.

When you click on that symbol, your browser may ask you to select a feed reader to subscribe with. Your browser may give you the option of creating a bookmark for your feed. Or you may want to set up a feed reader with services like Bloglines.com or Google Reader. Netvibes.com is a house favorite, since it provides a great layout for tracking many news sources on a variety of topics in one place. In addition, some sites (including our blog, GroundswellOnline.org) allow you to get updates automatically sent right to your email.

Two options for using RSS feeds

1. If you want a range of news sources on a particular topic, you can create a feed based on search results. For instance, if you subscribe to the results of a search on GoogleNews for "Iraq", those results will automatically update with new stories in your feed reader. You can do the same on sites like Digg.com or Technorati.com. Google News gives you the option to get alerts with the latest search results in your email.
2. If you want to focus on one particular news source or blog, you can usually go to their homepage and find a feed for their headlines. You can often get feeds from a particular section of an media outlet's website, and many outlets feature a page full of feeds they specially offer.

Tips for Gathering Petition Signatures

Gathering petition signatures can be a fun and simple way to take your activism a step further. The below tips are great for petition gathering, and some of them are key to any kind of organizing.

What to say

1. The 'Hook.' Grab a pen and paper and come up with 3-5 short, snappy one-sentence 'hooks' to grab people's attention. The idea is to ask a question that would 1) serve as an opening to a conversation, 2) convey the essence of an issue, and 3) let folks know that supporting your cause is really easy.

Here are a couple examples:

- "Hi there, can you sign a petition telling our next president to leave no soldier behind in Iraq?"
- "Do you have a minute to leave no soldier behind in Iraq?"
- "Have a minute? I have a petition to end the war in Iraq."

Come up with a bunch and experiment with which ones work best. See if humor works.

2. Cater your message to your audience. What worked great at a peace march may not fly at a Fourth of July parade.

3. Check out our talking points on page 2. They'll be helpful when folks ask you questions.

Make it fun

Sure, some people will say 'no,' or they'll walk right by you, or they'll try and pull you into a debate about how wrong you are. Here are some tips on how to find the right people and come away from the experience with a strong sense of accomplishment.

1. Bring a friend! It can be really fun to work together and develop a 'routine.' Or you can play some fun games:

- See who can get the most people to laugh while they sign the petition.
- Give each other a silly phrase ("Heaven's to Betsy!") that you have to work into conversation with people.
- Make it fun by wearing a costume or a funny hat.

2. Enjoy humanity. You can bet that while doing this, you will meet some pretty great people along the way.

3. If you hit a losing streak. Remember, the folks who ended segregation and expanded voting rights built their cause partly by using tactics like these. Isn't that inspiring?

What to bring. You don't need much, just:

- Clipboards
- Pens
- Friends
- Comfy shoes
- And of course, lots of petitions.

Location, Location, Location

- Finding the right spot can make all the difference. Here are just a few ideas:
- Casual gatherings
- The park
- The grocery store
- At work
- Farmer's markets
- Appropriately themed public gatherings (Parades, Rallies, Outdoor concerts.)
- The library
- Riding public transit
- Outside a movie that relates to the issue. (Body of War, Stop-Loss, Rendition, are all perfect, but any progressive politically themed movie can work.)

Understanding Iraq – The case for alternatives to open-ended occupation

The cost of continuing Bush's failed strategy is too high.

Every day Americans and Iraqis are seeing something that the Bush administration is missing -- that the US occupation of Iraq is profoundly counter-productive. The tremendous sacrifices in blood and treasure made by the US and Iraq have not resulted in the political stability promised by the Bush administration. Five years into the war, it is well past the time to implement a different strategy that will meet US and Iraqi security, economic and political needs.

More than four thousand US soldiers have been killed since the US invaded Iraq in March of 2003. The Iraqi civilian death toll mounts to a number no one can even agree on, but could be in the hundreds of thousands.¹ The president's February 2007 surge of 30,000 additional troops into Iraq failed to make progress towards political reconciliation. We are spending \$12.3 billion a month², and Iraq is less stable today than it was when the occupation began. Meanwhile, we have failed miserably at providing healthcare to our injured veterans, and America's standing in the world continues to deteriorate.

The US occupation of Iraq continues to severely damage America's credibility in the region, undermining US legitimacy in Iraq's peace process and weakening our position in negotiating with Iraq's neighbors. In Iraq and the Middle East, Abu Ghraib is far from forgotten. The continuing impunity of security contractors like Blackwater only adds to a sense of lawlessness. Iraq's neighbors see the millions of refugees that flood their borders as further evidence of a failing strategy. The administration's "surge" strategy brought temporary reductions in violence, but failed to bring lasting stability and advance the stated goal of political progress.

The occupation has also failed to make any progress in reconstruction. While much of Iraq still lacks clean water and reliable electricity, the Pentagon pumps billions of dollars into bizarre construction projects, including an amusement park³ and a five billion dollar plan to construct lavish accommodations around the US embassy, including luxury hotels and a shopping center⁴. This is in addition to the enormous military bases already established and stocked with Pizza Huts and movie theaters.⁵

Still, the Bush administration stubbornly insists that a military occupation is the best strategy for Iraq. Unfortunately, President Bush and his preferred successor, Sen. McCain⁶, continue to make inferences regarding the establishment of a permanent presence inside Iraq. President Bush has also been conducting secretive negotiations on a plan with the Iraqi government that would allow for an indefinite US military presence in Iraq that could include as many as 58 bases. The deal would also give the US military immunity from the law, while giving them authority to arrest Iraqi citizens without having to consult Iraqi authorities.⁷

It is well past time for Congress to stop funding this failed, unaccountable strategy and instead invest in a political solution that shows greater promise for stabilizing Iraq.

¹ <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22537.pdf> and "Study Claims Iraq's 'Excess' Death Toll Has Reached 655,000." By David Brown, Washington Post, Wednesday, October 11, 2006

² Congressional Research Service Report, February 2008: <http://openocrs.com/document/RL33110>

³ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article3802051.ece>

⁴ <http://blog.wired.com/defense/2008/05/planners-dream.html>

⁵ See both: "Largest base in Iraq has small-town Feel," Washington Post, and [Lynn's Woolsey's 1/17/07 OpEd](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007-11-17/07-OpEd) in SF Chronicle.

⁶ <http://www.crooksandliars.com/2008/01/06/mccain-permanent-presence-in-iraq-is-fine-as-long-as-iraqis-are-the-ones-dying/>

⁷ <http://www.groundswellonline.org/groundswell/2008/06/bushs-secret-pl.html>

The more effective strategy emphasizes a diplomatic solution, not a military one, and meets our moral responsibility to the Iraqi people. We call for:

- *A timeline for complete withdrawal.* The facts on the ground demonstrate that our ability to play a constructive role in Iraq would increase if we set a clear timeline for withdrawal and begin bringing all soldiers and private security contractors home immediately. We would gain crucial diplomatic leverage with most of the factions involved in Iraq's civil strife. Announcing a full withdrawal and beginning it immediately would also instantly increase our diplomatic leverage to gain the economic and diplomatic support of regional and international actors, like Iran. In turn, that leverage could be used to encourage diverse Iraqi factions to come to the table for serious negotiation and reconciliation.

Implementing a strategy of full military disengagement in the near term also frees up US financial resources for diplomacy, reconstruction and reconciliation. At the same time, it liberates the US government's attention so it can focus on harnessing the creativity and skill of the Departments of State, Commerce and Treasury as they help in Iraqi-led efforts to create real stability. On the other hand, if we leave large numbers of troops behind, Iraqi insurgents as well as international terrorist groups will benefit from the perception that the occupation is continuing.

Unfortunately, much of the Congressional leadership advocating a timeline for withdrawal is still talking about the possibility of leaving tens of thousands of troops behind after the withdrawal. An Iraq policy where "redeployment" drags on or where large numbers of troops are left behind will seriously undermine the diplomatic benefits of a military disengagement strategy. Leaving a residual force beyond embassy protection would leave US troops as targets for the insurgency and would do nothing to diminish the view of the US as foreign occupiers. A residual force would be unable to avoid being drawn into internal fighting while still stationed in Iraq.

- *A diplomatic surge that includes regional diplomacy.* The US must redirect its resources from its failed military strategy towards a robust diplomatic initiative aimed at fostering reconciliation amongst Iraq's warring factions. A successful strategy toward the resolution of Iraq's civil war must include the diplomatic engagement of Iraq's neighbors, and rule out aggression against them. The US must reach out to Iraq's neighbors, including Iran and Syria, to forge a regional peace process. Iran's importance in the region was underscored in spring 2008 when members of Iraq's Parliament sought Iran's help in negotiating a ceasefire with Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army.⁸
- *Meeting our moral responsibility.* According to a poll conducted by Public Agenda in Spring 2008, 56 percent of Americans believe we have a moral responsibility to Iraqis. However, there is a bipartisan push in Congress for the Iraqi people to start paying for everything from rebuilding infrastructure to an unsustainable program of payoffs the US started to keep Sunni militia from attacking.⁹ The US must live up to its moral obligation to the Iraqi people by funding reconstruction projects, and providing economic assistance and humanitarian aid.
- *Rebuilding Iraq's economy.* Iraqis are experiencing widespread unemployment and economic hardship. This provides fertile ground for sectarian militias to flourish. Unemployed youth are easy targets for recruiters looking to add to their ranks. The radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who commands the powerful Mahdi Army, builds good will by providing basic social services the government is unable to match.¹⁰

⁸ <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/03/31/iraq.main/index.html>

⁹ <http://www.groundswellonline.org/groundswell/2008/05/would-you-mind.html#comments>

¹⁰ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6633285>

- *Rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure.* Much of Iraq still does not have the same access to clean water and reliable electricity it had before the 2003 invasion. The US should redirect funds from outlandish and wasteful construction projects¹¹ towards addressing these basic needs.
- *A US-led international drive for humanitarian assistance.* The US must live up to its moral obligation to the Iraqi people by leading an international effort to fund projects that address Iraq's humanitarian crisis. For example, we should provide aid to the two million refugees who have fled Iraq, as well as the 1.9 million who are internally displaced.¹²
- *Conditional international peacekeeping.* If the Iraqi people request international peacekeeping forces, the US should assist in coordinating this endeavor.

Americans are ready for a new strategy

The 2006 elections were a clear mandate to Congress to get our soldiers out of Iraq. While we have made progress, congressional leaders were unable to garner the votes needed to overcome the Bush administration's stonewalling. When the president vetoed the timeline for withdrawal that Congress passed, congressional leaders failed to match his resolve with another timeline. Instead they caved, and too many policymakers were able to remain on the fence, with many still supporting the war.

The Iraq war again promises to be a central issue in congressional and presidential elections, and support in the American public for a withdrawal of US troops remains high. Polls have shown that two thirds of Americans support withdrawal from Iraq. The polls also show that a majority of Americans feel a deep responsibility to meet our moral obligations to Iraqis.¹³ This election year we need to make it clear that politicians who support continuing the occupation of Iraq do so at great political cost. We also need to make it clear that candidates running for office improve their chances when they support a timeline for withdrawing all our troops from Iraq.

While there have been obstacles to passing withdrawal legislation, Congress must continue acting on the will of the American public through votes to alter US policy in Iraq. The momentum of continued votes plays a critical role in sustaining the support of the American public and building a consensus for decisive action. Congress can play a critical role by supporting comprehensive legislation and articulating a plan that includes regional diplomacy, economic and humanitarian aid, and international peacekeeping.

Read more about alternatives to unending occupation

1. A Responsible Plan to End the War in Iraq: <http://responsibleplan.com/>. A plan put forward by military experts and several candidates for Congress. Download the Responsible Plan: http://responsibleplan.com/o/2757/images/responsible_plan.pdf
2. Strategic Reset. Produced by the Center for American Progress and written by Brian Katulis, Larry Korb and Peter Juul, this report outlines a phased redeployment plan to take place over one year. http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/06/strategic_reset.html
3. After the Surge. By Steven Simon, a former member of the Clinton administration's National Security Council. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/12172/>
5. A full digest of alternatives to Bush's plan is offered by the Project for Defense Alternatives. <http://www.comw.org/pda/0512exitplans.html>

¹¹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article3802051.ece> and <http://blog.wired.com/defense/2008/05/planners-dream.html>

¹² <http://www.uniraq.org/docsmaps/humanitarian.asp>

¹³ <http://publicagenda.org/foreignpolicy/>