U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

United States Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
Opening Statement in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Hearing on the Nomination of John Negroponte to be Deputy Secretary of State
January 30, 2007
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Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Today the Committee meets to consider the nomination of John Negroponte to be the Deputy Secretary of State.   It has been over seven months since Deputy Secretary Zoellick announced that he was leaving the State Department. In so doing, the Administration managed to set a dubious record – the longest period without a Deputy Secretary of State since the position was created in 1972.

Ambassador Negroponte is well known to this Committee. In the last six years, he served as Ambassador to the United Nations and then as Ambassador to Iraq before becoming Director of National Intelligence. From 1960 to the mid-1990s, he had a distinguished Foreign Service career, serving as an Ambassador to three different countries, as an Assistant Secretary of State, and as the Deputy National Security Adviser under President Reagan.

His breadth of experience at high levels of diplomacy is virtually unmatched. But experience is only one qualification for high office.

Senior officials must also have good judgment, and they must be forthcoming with Congress and the American people about the difficulties that we face – in Iraq and elsewhere. Deputy Secretary Armitage was just such a person; I urge Ambassador Negroponte to look to him as a model for dealing with this Committee.

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Last week, General Petraeus, the new military commander in Iraq, told the Committee on Armed Services that the situation in Iraq is "dire." The Iraq Study Group, whose leadership we will hear from this afternoon, called the situation "grave and deteriorating."

Because it has been reported that Ambassador Negroponte will take a leading role in Iraq policy, I would ask him to give us his assessment of the situation. How is Iraq different than when you served there? Why do you believe the President's surge policy will succeed? What are the elements of a workable political solution that can end sectarian violence?

If he is confirmed, the Ambassador should not confuse the Senate's endorsement of him as an endorsement of the policies of the Administration that he has been nominated to serve. After three weeks of hearings in this Committee, I am more convinced than ever that surging our forces into the middle of a civil war is a tragic mistake. I am equally convinced that our only chance to leave Iraq with our interests intact rests on finding a political solution that ends the sectarian cycle of revenge.

The plan I've proposed with Les Gelb can take the poison out of Iraqi politics by giving Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds breathing room in their own regions. By empowering strong regional governments – as Iraq's constitution already provides – giving the Sunnis a fair share of oil revenues and bringing the neighbors in to support a political settlement, we still have a chance – a chance – to avoid trading a dictator for chaos.

If we are going to surge troops anywhere, it should be into Afghanistan, where the Taliban appears to be making a serious comeback.

Every Deputy Secretary takes on duties assigned to him by the Secretary of State. So I would ask you, Mr. Ambassador, to outline the areas of responsibility that you expect to have as Deputy Secretary and to give us your assessment of the major policy questions facing us in each of those areas. I would like to specifically request that you give us your views on Darfur, which was a major responsibility of Deputy Secretary Zoellick, but which seems to have fallen down on the priority list.

The Administration rightly called what is happening in Darfur genocide, but those words have not been matched by deeds to stop it. And I'd like your assessment of the North Korea situation, which I understand will be part of your job description.

Let me turn now to Senator Lugar for any remarks that he may have.

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