

Gordon Smith's Current Position on Iraq Could Make a Republican Downright Blue

By Jim Pasero

It's February 19, 2007, President's Day, and Oregon's U.S. Senator Gordon Smith is in Portland for the week taking the time to unequivocally break from his friend and his president, George W. Bush. Smith is using his visit to do some clean up work — to put a narrative behind what CNN described as an “emotional speech” on the Senate floor December 7 when he broke ranks with a president who is still mostly popular within his party. Loyalty is a big deal in the GOP.

R.C. Hammond, Gordon Smith's press secretary, said that CNN was the first to report Smith's evening floor speech. That was, Hammond says, when the phone in Smith's office began to ring and ring and ring.

Smith told the Senate that Thursday night: “I am at the end of my rope when it comes to supporting a policy that has our soldiers patrolling the same streets in the same way, being blown up by the same bombs, day after day. That is absurd. It may be even criminal.”

Smith went on in his Senate address to say, “I, for one, am tired of paying the price of 10 or more of our troops dying a day. So let's cut and run, or cut and walk, but let us fight the war on terror more intelligently than we have because we have fought this war in a very lamentable way.”

Smith's floor statement became a prominent discussion point on “The Lehrer News Hour” and “Washington Week.” By the weekend, Smith was describing his about face, seated alongside Sen. Joe Biden, on ABC's “This Week with George Stephanopoulos.” His remarks received national and international attention, and of course, attention in his home state of Oregon.

Longtime Smith consultant Dan Lavey says Oregonians now associate the senator with his views on Iraq three times more than any other issue in his decade in the Senate. Had Smith and his staff had a chance for a speech mulligan, they would not have used the word “criminal” to describe the president's prosecution of the war. It is a phrase that especially upset his Oregon voter base. Still, Smith made his point and got the nation's attention.

On his recent visit, Smith fleshes out his thinking for concerned Oregonians: “I think we have to recognize and begin to refocus on America's larger interests on the war on terror, of which Iraq is part. But we are being consumed in a police action when we need to be focused on taking on Jihadists. My point is simply this: We have a symmetrical army, a military that is great at toppling tyrants and taking on terrorists. They have an asymmetrical force, and an asymmetrical force will always frustrate a symmetrical army. I am not afraid to fight them, but I want to fight them on our terms, and not simply police this ancient feud for which there is no good answer.

“I see the Sunni-Shia thing as quicksand, and if we are bogged down in the quicksand we can't be quick enough to get ahead of Jihadists who would export terrorism to us.”

After solidly supporting the president for the first four years of the war in Iraq, is Smith's new position on Iraq believable? Convincing?

Oregon has a long history of maverick senators who have been hesitant about war. Democrat Wayne Morse was one of only two U.S. senators to vote against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964. In 1970, Mark Hatfield sponsored a Senate bill with George McGovern that called for the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. In 1990, Hatfield voted against the first Gulf War.

So does Smith have the bonafide maverick credentials of a Morse or a Hatfield? Stephanopoulos thinks so, comparing Smith to those Oregon senators.

“He made the comparison; I didn’t,” says Smith, good-naturedly.

Like Morse? Hatfield? No, says pollster Tim Hibbitts.

“Gordon reminds me politically of Bob Packwood,” Hibbitts says. “Packwood was very adept at portraying himself as enough of a maverick when needed. Yes, Oregon was then a less blue state, but even so, it was not a hugely Republican-friendly state for much of the last part of his career. He was very adept at negotiating these shoals, giving each side just enough so that he didn’t anger either side too much. Packwood was very good at doing that politically, and Smith has done pretty much the same.”

The political backdrop, of course, is that in the last year Oregon has moved even further left, as evidenced by Republican gubernatorial candidate Ron Saxton’s loss in the 2006 election. A detail not lost on Smith. So the question still stands: Is Smith’s abrupt shift on the Iraq war a change of heart or a calculated political move to desperately try to keep pace with Oregon’s leftward drift? “It could be both,” says Hibbitts. “They don’t have to be mutually exclusive.”

Out of the 23 Republican senators running for re-election in ’08, only three are running in blue states. Smith is one of them. The others are Norm Coleman of Minnesota, whom Smith talks to regularly, and Susan Collins of Maine. All three have been critical of the president’s handling of Iraq in recent months.

“The president’s approval rating was right at 51 percent when he got re-elected in 2004,” says Hibbitts. “He got a little spike, up to 55 percent, and then he started to decline. It was not just Katrina. It was Iraq. He has now been effectively under 40 percent for a full year.”

That, says Hibbitts, is the problem.

“Republicans who will be up for re-election in ’08 are saying, ‘How the heck am I going to run for re-election with a president potentially with a 35 or 38 percent approval rate?’ Now in politics, things change,” says Hibbitts, “but the length of time the president’s numbers have been bad and what’s going on in Iraq suggest it is going to be very difficult to get any sustained rally going.”

Hibbitts’ thoughts on Smith? “Gordon’s approval rating is still decent,” he says. “He has consistently run approval ratings for most of his first and second term close to 60 percent. But now it has slipped. If you were simply to look at Smith’s numbers, in and of themselves, they

don't look terrible, but you can't take them out of the context of everything else that is going on — the state he has to run in, the president of his own party being unpopular, and the situation in Iraq. Let me put it this way, Gordon Smith is far more popular than George Bush in Oregon, but Gordon Smith is less popular than he was two years ago.

“In a different year with different circumstances, Earl Blumenauer running for the Senate would be frankly an unlikely choice. But in 2008, if things continue as they are right now, I think he would be a very, very dangerous opponent for Gordon Smith. Other folks, conceivably a state legislator, like a Vicki Walker, or even an unknown, someone like Steve Novick, could cause him a lot of trouble,” says Hibbitts.

Smith has another problem besides credibility on his position change in Iraq — he must walk his party's tightrope to avoid a primary fight.

“The danger for Smith or for any Republican who goes hard against the president is, ‘What's this guy in my own party doing attacking my president?’” Hibbitts says. “You could conceivably get to the point where he gets a primary challenge, not even necessarily from someone well known. It doesn't mean that he would lose, but you could see a situation where a number of folks would say, ‘You know, I'm mad as hell at Gordon Smith. I'm going to park a protest vote here.’ The same thing that happened when Lutz ran against Packwood in '86.”

Political problems like these are why Smith decided he'd better clearly explain to voters what led to his senate floor denouncement of the president and his execution of the Iraq war.

Smith's doubts about the president's policies began on a trip to Baghdad he took last May with Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), a six-term member of the U.S. Senate.

On May 16, 2006, just days before Hatch and Smith went to Baghdad, Smith spoke on the senate floor and ironically thanked President Bush for nominating his older brother Milan Smith Jr. to U.S. circuit judge for the Ninth Circuit. Gordon Smith is the eighth of 10 children of Milan Smith (assistant secretary of agriculture under Eisenhower) and Jessica Udall (cousin to Rep. Morris Udall and Kennedy's Interior Secretary Stewart Udall).

Smith said on the floor at the time, “I thank President Bush for his confidence in my brother, for his courtesy to my family, and to all his staff, specifically Harriet Miers, who have been wonderful throughout this journey. I am profoundly thankful to them.”

The trip Hatch and Smith took placed them in Baghdad on May 20, 2006, the same day Prime Minister Maliki's government was sworn in. Hatch says it isn't unusual for the two of them to travel together. “He is my closest friend in the Senate. I think the world of him. Oregon is lucky to have someone of his caliber.”

Hatch and Smith's relationship is close enough that Hatch and Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) wrote the foreword to Smith's very personal book about his son Garrett's suicide in September 2003, “Remembering Garrett: One Family's Battle with a Child's Depression.”

“We spent a night and day in Baghdad,” says Smith about the trip. “It happened to be the same day that the government was finally empanelled and Maliki became prime minister. It was a day in which a suicide bomber exploded a vehicle in a market killing 70 people.

“We were flown out of the Green Zone on a helicopter to the airport. As we were lifting off, we both looked at each other with concern and said almost in unison, ‘This could go either way.’ We left having less confidence than when we arrived,” says Smith.

One of the reasons Smith now says that he looked at Hatch with concern was because Hatch had the same observation in Baghdad that Smith had a year earlier in Kirkut.

The reaction? “That this went from a conquest of a tyrant to fighting an insurgency,” Smith says. “The way I saw us fighting the insurgency was to create a Green Zone where we could be safe. And then when there was a disturbance out there, our guys would saddle up in their Bradley Fighting Vehicles and rush out, and they would shoot it up, clean up the area, and rush back to the Green Zone. I saw that very thing on the day I was in Baghdad with Hatch. When the bomb went off — 70 people dead — our soldiers saddled up and rode out. And guess what? When they finished shooting up, where did they go? They came back to the Green Zone. The Green Zone is about one-fifth the size of Baghdad. It is safe there. But if you’re going to win an insurgency, the whole city of Baghdad needs to be a Green Zone.”

Hatch agrees that the trip was sobering. “Baghdad was kind of an armed camp.”

Hatch describes Smith’s evolution on Iraq, “Gordon came to the conclusion that we weren’t making headway. He was tired of the troops being killed.”

As close as Smith and Hatch are, Hatch came back from Baghdad unable to make the same conclusion about the war that Smith was beginning to feel. “I felt all along that winning this war would be difficult,” says Hatch.” When we went in, I said it would take 10 years, and people laughed at me. We must have staying power.”

Despite his different conclusions on Iraq, Hatch remains impressed with how Smith came to his position. “I wish more people could approach the Iraq issue the way he’s done it. He’s been very thoughtful. There is room for debate without disparaging the other side. We need a sincere debate.”

Says Hatch about their differing positions on Iraq and the differing political makeup of the states they represent. “We don’t agree, but his position is a legitimate point of view. He does represent the people of Oregon, and that’s different than representing Utah, and he has the courage to do it.”

One of the places that Smith began voicing his concern about the Iraq war was during the weekly Republican conference meetings. These meetings are regularly attended by Vice President Cheney, whom Smith describes as usually keeping a silent presence during the sessions.

“I had been talking for a long time and expressing my concern,” says Smith, “and urging that we needed to push the Iraqi leaders to make the hard political decisions on revenue sharing of oil, on the structure of federalism, on civil rights, and on human rights for minorities and women, and my disappointment had been growing with every day, week and month that went by without decisions being made.”

Smith points to two books that helped form his December floor speech, one historical and one a recent policy work on the planning and execution of the Iraqi war.

“I picked up a copy of John Keegan’s work, ‘The First World War.’ It is the standard work on World War I. I was struck by the insanity of running a generation of young British boys into German machine guns without a change in tactics and with little regard for the cost. It was a very hard-edged military leadership that persisted in doing over and over again that which did not succeed.”

For Smith, the comparisons to Iraq were clear, and he was also turned off by the unresponsiveness of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld who Smith said treated his concerns contemptuously as if to say, “Don’t bother me, boy.”

“I remember after reading the Keegan book,” says Smith, “thinking how we kept doing the same thing over and over again at the cost of our soldiers’ lives with no improvement in the political environment in Iraq — in fact, a deterioration with the rise of the militias and genocide being practiced on a nightly basis on hundreds of people.

“Then one night I was leaving Portland to take a flight to D.C. and I picked up a copy of “Fiasco” (“Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq,” by Thomas E. Ricks), which is quite an account of how we got where we are. The author writes for *The Washington Post*. I started reading it as we pulled out of the gate in Portland, and by the time we landed at Dulles I was sick to my stomach. Ironically, the next day Rumsfeld came to the Senate Republican policy lunch, and I asked him in front of the entire Republican Senate if he had an answer to the charges that were made in the book. He did not provide me an answer; he simply attacked the author.”

The encounter between Rumsfeld and Smith took place in July. It would not be their last.

“Just before the August recess, I had another go at Rumsfeld,” says Smith. “There is a room in the Capitol called S-407 where we receive updates of a top secret nature on a nearly weekly basis. And we had the president there, the secretary of defense, the secretary of state, the head of the joint chiefs of staff, the director of national security. They were all present, and I brought up the same issues. ‘Why is it getting worse? Why are the Iraqi leaders failing to make the decisions that will produce the peace that our boys are dying for?’

“Basically I was told, ‘You have to give them time,’ and ‘You just need to tough it out.’ It was very unsatisfactory.”

Smith then describes a sore point between many GOP congressional members and the administration. “At the same time in October, a week before the election, [Bush] said Rumsfeld

would stay until the end of his second term. I was not thrilled because I had grown so dissatisfied with Mr. Rumsfeld.”

Smith explains why: “In the middle of October we captured a major Shia militia leader because we had set up checkpoints that were working. Mr. Maliki required that the checkpoint be taken down and that the Shia milita leader be released. Well, I was steaming by then. And then Mr. Bush says he hopes that Rumsfeld would be his secretary of defense until the end of his term, and then the day after the election he fires Rumsfeld.

“Some time later, I heard the alarm and I turned on the TV about 6:30 a.m., and the first thing I hear is eight more U.S. soldiers killed by roadside bombs. I went from steamed to boiled,” says Smith. “I went to the senate floor and did what I did.

“I felt I wasn’t being listened to, and I felt that the Iraqi leaders needed to hear Republicans say what I felt. This was not a snap decision. This was something about which I felt deeply.”

Smith’s frustration is shared, he says, by other GOP members of the Senate. “There is nobody in our conference who isn’t deeply alarmed with the way in which this war has been allowed to be managed.”

Smith says that includes the GOP Senate leadership as well, even Republican Assistant Minority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.).

The administration’s strategy has left many GOP members of Congress worried about the prosecution of the Iraq war. Smith, the unlikeliest of vocal critics because of his usually nonconfrontational, smooth style, relates a conversation he had with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sometime before the war.

“She was not yet secretary of state. I said, ‘Madame National Security Advisor, Iraq is a European creation. It has only been held together by a dictatorship. Eventually these three tribes are going to separate, and that is fine with me.’ Then she went into this explanation of how the Saudis wouldn’t like it, the Iranians wouldn’t like it, the Turks wouldn’t like it, and we couldn’t be part of it. And in a way she is right. In this sense — it isn’t for us to divide them. We can’t impose a religious and ethnic apartheid, but I believe it will evolve into a soft partition. But that is their decision.”

By winter, Smith wasn’t the only GOP senator to be angered by the administration’s Iraq strategy. Smith would be joined by Sens. Voinovich (Ohio), Sununu (N. H.), Collins (Maine), Warner (Va.), Brownback (Kan.), Coleman (Minn.), Hagel (Neb.), and even from time to time by the Republican’s respected ranking member of the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee, Richard Lugar (Ind.).

Those voices, led most aggressively by Smith and Hagel, plus the GOP defeat in the 2006 election, forced the administration to eventually act. Smith says about the administration’s latest Iraq policy: “We don’t need a sixth surge in Baghdad. If we do need a sixth surge, it needs to be done by Iraqis who speak the language, know the neighborhood and understand the culture.”

But just as Smith digs in deeper against the president's policies, there appears to be — for the first time in quite awhile — elements of hope in Iraq, particularly when it comes to the appointment of General David Petraeus and the “surge” strategy.

A March headline in London's *Financial Times* reads, “Iraq Enjoys Brief Lull in Sectarian Violence — A crackdown has reduced the death toll but Baghdad and Washington are wary of claiming an early victory.”

New York Times columnist Tom Friedman, not a fan of the Bush administration, writes in a recent column, “As for General Petraeus, I have no idea whether his military strategy is right, but at least he has one.”

Says Hatch of Petraeus and his chances for success and his appreciation for the administration's new Iraq policy: “Petraeus is a breath of fresh air. Since he's been over in Iraq he's been successful. He knows the culture, and he has people working who now know the culture and speak the language. When he was before the Senate he got 100 percent of the vote, but the Democratic resolution would take away that support.”

Packwood is also impressed by Petraeus. Packwood notes that if the surge were to work it would change the politics. “I was a hawk. I supported Nixon on Vietnam to the end,” Packwood says. “If the surge works, you would be amazed at how many people who are now criticizing the president will say, ‘I told you if we stood together it would work.’”

But Smith won't be one of them. On March 15, Smith escalated his opposition to the war by becoming the only Republican in the Senate to join the Democrats in voting to withdraw American troops from Iraq in 2008. The resolution failed by a vote of 50-48.

New York Times reporter Robin Toner wrote about the atmosphere swirling around the Senate the day of the vote: “As they left the Senate floor, several other moderate Republicans — moderates who are facing difficult re-election campaigns next year — were quick to register their opposition to the president's overall Iraq strategy. But they said they were leery of legislating a troop pullout to begin within four months.”

Toner quotes Sen. Collins, “That is such a short timeframe for withdrawal.”

The only Republican defection, Smith's statement read: “Setting specific dates for withdrawal is unwise, but what is worse is remaining mired in the quicksand of the Sunni-Shia civil war.”

Two weeks later, Smith would vote on two separate occasions to set a timetable for withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. For this vote, he would be joined by Hagel as the only two members of the GOP to vote for the measure. On March 27, the measure passed the Senate by a vote of 50-48. On March 29 the Senate voted 51-47 to attach the resolution to Iraq war funding. Again, lone Republicans Hagel and Smith voted yes. President Bush has promised to veto the measure.

A poll taken by Riley Research Associates measuring voter reaction to Smith's recent opposition to the president's policies leaves Smith in a decent position for re-election — with his favorable ratings in good shape with both Republicans and Democrats in Oregon. That doesn't mean, however, that Smith's office hasn't been taking heat from his Republican base voters.

Writes one former Smith supporter and donor in a blast email to friends and associates:

In the war against Islamic terrorism Iraq is only one front on which this war is being waged. Those of us with adult children serving in the military are acutely aware the war is being waged on many fronts, including Southeast Asia, the Philippines, Africa, and Afghanistan. Iraq is the most important front to the enemy. If Iraq falls, they know they can conquer all of the Middle East, including Israel. Senator Smith's vote demonstrates a lack of courage and resolve to win this war that threatens our country. His vote directly undermines our soldiers' moral. Smith's vote only encourages those opposed to a stable Iraq to try again. I would urge you to remember this vote next year when Gordon Smith is up for re-election. Personally, I am resolved to committing time and resources to any candidate willing to run against him in the primary.

A disgruntled base is something Smith won't be able to entirely avoid as he approaches the 2008 election. Hibbitts explains Smith's juggling problems: "Seventy-five percent of all Republicans still support Bush on the war, but Democrats are in single digits and Independents are in the 20s. That's not an easy circle for a Republican in a blue state to square."

Smith, for his part, has an ace in the hole if Oregon voters happen to be thinking long term, and that's his seat on the Senate Finance Committee.

"From a standpoint of what you can do for a state," says Packwood, former chair of the Finance Committee, "the two most important committees are Finance and Appropriations, and Gordon is moving up the seniority list."

The Senate Finance Committee has jurisdiction over taxation, trade legislation, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

Smith, now in his second term in the U.S. Senate but in his first term on the Finance Committee, already sits sixth in seniority on the Republican side of the committee. And he will most likely continue his rapid advancement. "Just on averages," says Packwood, "he will easily be on every conference in his third term."

"His position on the Finance Committee is important," says Hatch also a committee member. "The Finance Committee is a powerful, important committee, and he is a powerful member of it. When will Oregon get that again?"

Hatch and Smith have worked together on a number of issues, but the one most important to Hatch is their work on embryonic stem cell research. "Here are two pro-life Mormons from the West," says Hatch, "who come out in support of embryonic stem cell research. We brought the issue to getting 75 percent support from the American public."

And Hatch is a big believer in the researchers. “If what happens in the future is what the scientists tell us can happen with regard to cures, then this research may well cut the high cost of health care. Gordon’s influence on stem cell research was tremendous.”

So can Smith navigate his way around this contentious war so that he continues to ascend the U.S. Senate’s hierarchy? And does his change of position on Iraq have credibility with voters?

The success or failure of the president’s new “surge” strategy will have a lot to do with answering that question. Oregon’s junior senator may have broken ranks with his party and with his president on the strategy, but says Smith, “George Bush is still my friend. What I say, I do not say in anger, I say in sorrow. I hope he is right, and I am wrong. I would love to be able to admit that publicly, but I fear that isn’t the case.”

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