

INTERVIEW: GARY HART

Gary Hart was a U.S. senator from Colorado, 1975-87. Sen. Hart was a Democratic presidential candidate in 1984 and 1988. He co-chaired, with Sen. Warren Rudman (R-NH), the U.S. Commission on National Security for the 21st Century (1998-2001). The following interview was conducted by Gareth Porter, an independent historian and foreign-policy analyst, on October 12, 2005 (see his article "A Responsible Exit Strategy" in Middle East Policy, Vol. XII, No. 3, fall 2005).

GARETH PORTER: *I'd like to start with the op-ed piece that you did in The Washington Post in late August in which you commented on the failure of the Democratic Party to offer any alternative on Iraq. Why do you think the Democratic Party has not been able to be more active and forceful on Iraq?*

SEN. HART: The obvious answer is that most of the so-called leaders, those most prominent in the party, particularly in foreign affairs and prospective candidates for president, signed on to the war almost to a person. Exception has to be made, obviously, for people like Ted Kennedy and Robert C. Byrd and Russ Feingold and others. I think my recollection is that the Democratic Caucus divided pretty much down the middle, almost 20-20, 22-22, on the war resolution. Almost all of the more visible Democrats voted for the war.

I would suppose the explanations run from the crass to the noble, the crass being individuals seeking to protect themselves on their conservative flank by not opposing a war that 70 or 80 percent of the American people believed, based on the presidential assertions, was in our national-security

interest. The noble accepted the president's arguments that there were weapons of mass destruction that Saddam was saying he had the capability of using against us — and the intent to do so — and that he was harboring al-Qaeda terrorists who were attacking our country.

Somewhere in that range are the various explanations of Senators Clinton, Bayh, Biden, Kerry and others. They each have to speak for themselves. I think more important is now, three years later, when all of the rationale for the war has been totally disproved, why no one of that group has stepped forward to say, "The president misled me and misled the country, and I want to now state that it is not in America's interest for us to be enmeshed in an insurgency in the Middle East, and I now intend to do all I can to get American military forces out of there." That's what has not happened, and I cannot give you a reason.

Q: *Is there a problem of their simply not seeing any alternative?*

SEN. HART: I can't believe that this collection of people, given their staff resources and resources in the policy

community broadly defined — both in the party and outside it — couldn't, in the space of 72 hours, come up with a six- or eight-point plan that would extricate America militarily from the region that wouldn't be cutting and running. Obviously, if you let the White House define the alternatives, they're going to be either stay the course or cut and run, which is nonsense. There are all kinds of alternatives in between. I can't believe it's a lack of resources. That leaves the only other alternative: a lack of will and imagination, the unwillingness to confront a bad choice made three years ago, and the hope that events will somehow bail them out.

I was called at the end of August by one Democratic senator, the one from my state [Ken Salazar]. He said the Democratic Caucus was going to meet — they reconvened in early September — to take up the issue of what the party's position on the war should be — and did I have any ideas? I came back to my office and in 15 or 20 minutes sent him a seven-point policy initiative for an alternative policy in Iraq. I had no staff resources or anything else, so it can be done. You and I have talked about convening three or four people to do this over a weekend or a week, and I think that's all it would have taken.

Q: Do you perceive the foreign-policy elite more generally now as having advanced far beyond where the Democratic party leadership is on Iraq in terms of its willingness to say that we need to have a very dramatic change of course?

SEN. HART: You're asking a lawyer in Denver to characterize a bunch of people on the East Coast and a few on the West Coast in general terms, and I can't do that. I think there are certainly pockets all over

the place now — whether in Boston or New York or Washington or Los Angeles — of individuals and groups saying this is way too much and we should be packing up and systematically getting out. But I don't think you can generalize about the whole policy elite. I don't know what's going on at the Council on Foreign Relations, for example, but whatever is going on there isn't getting a lot of press attention. By the way, this is isn't just the foreign-policy elite. I think there's great turmoil at institutions like *The New York Times* and maybe *The Washington Post* and a lot of other places. The *Times* editorially was against the war, but a lot of their columnists — reporters like Judy Miller — were on the bandwagon in favor of it. I think *The Washington Post*, although I didn't follow this closely, also had a mixed position but basically was in favor of the war. So I don't see a whole lot of strength coming out of the journalistic community to say we were wrong either.

Q: Let me ask you about the Bush administration itself at this point. Would you say that there is still some coherent thinking behind Middle East policy generally?

SEN. HART: No.

Q: Could you expand on that?

SEN. HART: I can't, because I'd be the last guy in the world to know. But, based on a rather long life and observing previous administrations when they got in a muddle: Everything looks great when events are going your way and 75 or 80 percent of the American people approve of what you're doing. When the reverse occurs, all the gates come down and the public, particularly in a lock-step administration like this, doesn't have access to the turmoil going on behind the scenes. You simply have to

believe that, in the White House and in the discussions between the White House and congressional leaders, there is a lot of agonizing, a lot of teeth-gnashing, a lot of finger pointing, and a lot of what-do-we-do-now discussions going on. But they are so good at not leaking that very little of this is getting into the press.

Q: Is this is a case where the administration simply is trying to do whatever it can to minimize the damage in terms of politics and public relations?

SEN. HART: I'm sure it is, but there are Vietnam analogies. Every night there are new Marines and soldiers being killed who have families and little children. It's not the size hemorrhage that you had in '66, '67, '68 and '69, but nevertheless it's a hemorrhage. And it's hollow policy. There is no reason to be there now. There is no reason the president gives, including that we've got to fight them over there so we don't have to fight them here, that holds any water, and everybody knows it.

So you have a presidency where the emperor has no clothes. But not only will his own party not say he has no clothes; the opposition party won't say he has no clothes. It's the damndest thing I've ever seen in my lifetime.

Q: Is there a possibility that this situation could bring about more fundamental shifts in terms of the party system? Is this a crisis of the two-party system?

SEN. HART: I don't think it's risen to

the level of crisis. There has been a kind of low-level crisis in the two-party system for 25 years or longer, dating back to Watergate, dating back to the assassination period of the '60s. This is a separate topic, but I have a theory that, starting with the assassination of John Kennedy and then Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, followed by Vietnam and all of the social turmoil of the '60s, there has been a leaking of public confidence in government. Watergate and the Pentagon Papers and everything were milestones on the way, but it's been a long, gradual road toward the erosion of public confidence in government in this country. This event, Iraq, is just part of that process.

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Q: Let me ask you about the military implications of the inability to extract the United States from Iraq in an orderly fashion. There is a lot of speculation that this war

will have the same effect as the Vietnam War had on the U.S. military in the 1970s.

SEN. HART: I think it's already happened. Every senior military officer who will be candid has said that we're exhausting both the Army and the Marine Corps in ground operations. And there's a secondary level of attrition and erosion in the Air Force and Navy just because of the kinds of constant ops, high-tech ops, that are going on in support of the ground forces. I think it'll take 20 years, at least, to rebuild the standing military in this country, not just financially but, more important, in terms of

the human element.

I think the costs in human and financial terms are enormous, and they haven't even begun to be calculated yet. The sad part is that, under our system, the people who have caused it won't be around to have to repair the damage. They'll all be gone.

Q: Do you think this is a reality that is more appreciated abroad than it is here at home? Is this already affecting the credibility of the United States as a power in the world?

SEN. HART: Oh, yes. I think that's true, but if you were to ask that question of Robert Kaplan — the principal proponent, as you know, of the idea that we are a far-flung military empire and ought to get used to it — he would say, as he does in a current book, that we've got military forces all over the world and that they are standing us in good stead, providing relief in Pakistan even as

we speak, and that this is the real American strength and presence that people admire and respect. If you buy that line, then Iraq is just kind of a hiccup. I don't buy it. I think that we should not be an empire. This is a very profound philosophical conviction on my part, because we are a republic, and you can't be a republic and an empire at the same time. People like Kaplan and Niall Ferguson and others don't seem to care about that very much, but I'm an old-fashioned small-"r" republican, and so I care about it a great deal. I

don't like the fact we've got military forces all over the world training other armies and doing special ops that most of us aren't even aware of. It scares me to death.

Q: How would you answer the argument that is basically accepted by the mainstream, both parties certainly, that the United States has to have the option of military force always available to protect access to the oil resources of the Persian Gulf?

SEN. HART: Given our heavy reliance on foreign supplies of oil and a disproportionate reliance on unstable supplies from the Persian Gulf, I think we have no

choice. But that calls for a different energy policy, and that's a separate subject. What dismays me, once again — back to the republic-versus-empire argument — is that the justification used for Gulf War I, and I think to a lesser degree for Gulf War II, is that

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we also have to guarantee world oil supplies.

What that says, and what in fact happened in Gulf War I, is that the secretary of state, James Baker, went around the world with a tin cup, collecting money from the Japanese and others so that American forces could liberate Kuwait and secure the oil supplies. I think it's the first time in American history that the American army became a mercenary army, and I am totally and unalterably opposed to that. There is no reason in the world that a

genuine coalition force to guarantee oil flows from the Persian Gulf cannot be constructed and operated under the United Nations or NATO or anyone else.

I've got a book coming out in January called *The Shield and the Cloak* in which I advocate an international declaration that the Persian Gulf is a zone of international interest and that the United Nations and other international agencies will guarantee to suppliers and consumers the free flow of oil from the region. Of course, America takes a role in that, but it would be a genuine international consortium guaranteed by international institutions, not the United States Army.

Q: *What about the present U.S. military posture in the Middle East in terms of basing arrangements, the "lily pad" bases in the Middle East and Central Asia? Would you be in favor of any adjustments in that posture?*

SEN. HART: This is not the occasion to go base by base, obviously, and the second problem is that there are a lot of bases we do now acknowledge, but — not being privy to classified briefings — I wouldn't know about. You hear about these things from Sy Hersh and other people, but you've got both an official policy and an unofficial policy, so you're not quite sure, with a government that is not candid with its own people, how far-flung those bases are and how big they are.

Start with Iraq itself. Are we or are we not building permanent military bases there? The official policy is that we are not, and yet it's somewhere between four and 12 bases in Iraq where concrete is being poured and steel is being welded. That sounds permanent to me, but you cannot get the press to ask the questions, and you certainly cannot get Congress to

ask the questions. You can't get the administration to candidly state whether "yes, we are" or "no, we are not." And that's in Iraq.

So, first of all, you've got a knowledge problem: How many bases, where are they, how big are they, and what are the plans? I think we need a military presence, but I've always been a strong advocate of a maritime strategy that creates a lot of presence in the world by the use of our Navy, because the carrier task groups are floating military bases with all the support and aircraft aboard and so on. You can have pre-positioned equipment in case you need to do some kind of rapid insertion; and if you beef up the Marines and the rapid-deployment and intervention forces, you can be in a place in strength very, very quickly these days if that's the way you've planned it. You don't necessarily have to suffer the political consequences of having a fixed military base there, particularly in a volatile region such as the Arab world.

Q: *What should be our strategy in the world for dealing with terrorism, particularly with al-Qaeda and Islamic terrorism?*

SEN. HART: I think pretty much what we were doing up to Tora Bora; that is, heavy reliance on combined Special Forces, including Rangers, Delta, the special CIA operatives, the guys on donkeys in civilian clothes going to the caves, pointing laser directors to B-2 bombers flying from Missouri bases and going in after them — the continuation of the early phases of the Afghan war. That probably requires some heavier-handed diplomacy with President Musharraf and the Pakistanis than we've been willing to use up to now. But if we're serious about destroying the center of the al Qaeda

network, we have no other choice.

This same book proposes consideration of a new fifth military force in America, which would be a composite of all of the special forces of all the other military services into a fifth service to combine their effectiveness. In the war on terrorism, it also obviously requires, as everybody knows, much greater collaboration with our allies in intelligence sharing and efforts in Europe to disrupt and destroy networks in places like Spain and Germany. Iraq has hurt that effort. I think we're going to pay a price for the disruption, if not destruction, of our traditional alliances in the willingness to share

Q: Let me turn to Syria and Iran, the other two states where the Bush administration has made threats of the use of force, either explicitly or implicitly. What would you suggest as an alternative strategy for dealing with those two countries?

SEN. HART: The Bush administration has finally been forced to stop the chest pounding that was going on in '03 and the Rumsfeldian veiled and unveiled threats to take matters into our own hands militarily if they didn't do what we told them to do. When the insurgency arose and began to put its roots down, it became pretty clear even to Rumsfeld and other hawks that we did not have the capability to fight an insurgency war in Iraq and move even Special Forces across the Iranian border. You don't hear that much anymore, and you don't hear it very much about Syria either, which suggests to me that we have worked out some kind of behind-the-scenes modus vivendi with the Syrians in which they're cooperating just enough to pull our teeth in terms of thinking of an invasion, but probably not enough to really

give us a hand on cross-border insurgency or jihadist transit.

We've pretty much been forced in Iran to do what we should have done in the first place, that is, make the nuclear issue in Iran an international issue and rely very heavily on our European allies to help us solve that — put them forward to negotiate, not make it a bilateral issue between the United States and Iran but a multilateral issue where we are, in effect, second-tier players behind the scenes, pushing the Europeans to do what everybody wants the Iranians to do: open up their facilities.

Q: So, you are in favor of taking a political-diplomatic initiative to bring about a settlement in Iraq?

SEN. HART: Yeah, let me run through the alternative policy that I gave to Ken Salazar at the end of August. First of all, "Establish negotiations with Sunni Arabs to agree to a mutual and speedy drawdown of American forces. The United States would pull agreed numbers of troops out of an occupation role in exchange for insurgent disarmament and completely withdraw those forces as the insurgency abandons the use of force and joins political discussions. Second, task former Sunni insurgent elements with the role of isolation and expulsion of outside, principally Saudi, jihadists." Both those together really focus on the issue that the president and those around him won't focus on: that all those attacking American forces in Iraq are not terrorists. By some estimates, 95 percent of them are national insurgents. They may be using terrorist methods, but that does not make them al-Qaeda.

The way I put it is, "The difference is, who is going to follow us home? And when the last Marine crosses the Iraqi border, the national insurgents are not going

to follow us home. Now, they may engage in civil war — that’s a separate issue — but they are not terrorists who threaten the United States’ security. The 5 to 10 percent of the so-called insurgency are foreign jihadists, and those are the ones we ought to be worried about. So step number one is drive a wedge between nationalists insurgents, largely Sunnis, and the foreign jihadists who are the real threat to U.S. national security.”

I go on to say, “Declare that the U.S. will not construct permanent military bases in Iraq; replace U.S. occupation forces with NATO peacekeeping units, which will oversee the training of Iraqi police and military units, and move those trained units into the principal security roles, especially border-control missions, to seal Iraq off from outside jihadists;

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organize a genuine international reconstruction program for Iraq with European and Asian contracting companies involved in competitive bidding for major infrastructure projects; establish a bank for Iraqi reconstruction, financed by all Western democratic governments; and, finally, create a new Iraqi oil company composed of a consortium of the Iraq Oil Ministry and major international oil producers to build modern production and distribution facilities and allocate revenues fairly to all Iraqis.” That’s the Hart plan.

Q: *Have you had any response at all to what you’ve proposed?*

SEN. HART: No. I never heard another word from Salazar. He may or may not

have gone into the caucus in September and laid this out, but I think if he did, he probably said, this is Salazar’s plan. So I would not have heard in any case.

Q: *If this central notion that you’ve put forward of driving a wedge between the Sunni insurgents and the foreign jihadists were actually put out there, don’t you think that represents a strategic idea that ought to catch fire?*

SEN. HART: Absolutely.

Q: *Would there be any basis for someone to oppose it?*

SEN. HART: Who would oppose it is the White House press guy saying, “Well, clearly Senator Hart or Gareth Porter doesn’t know what he’s talking about. All these people hate us and they’re all our enemies and we’ve got to fight them over there.”

You know, just the same old stuff. They’re stuck in that rut, and it’s partly because we’ve got a president who doesn’t understand nuance. If you were to explain the difference to him, he probably wouldn’t get it anyway; he’s programmed to go out there and say, “Stay the course and defeat the terrorists.” He’s backed up by a secretary of defense who says the same thing, a secretary of state who has kind of gone underground and now seems to have forgotten everything about Iraq that she was deeply involved in. I just don’t see them capable or inclined to now take on a degree of subtlety and nuance that they should have had in the first place.

They sold the war to the American

people on the grounds that Iraq was a threat to U.S. national security, and to now say, “We’ve thought about it and we’re smarter than we were then, and we understand that 90-plus percent of the people who are trying to kill us just want us out of there; they’re not coming to America; they just want us to leave.” And, then, they don’t want to have to deal with questions such as “Yes, but, Mr. President, what happens after we leave and there is a civil war?” Well, to a degree, that’s the Iraqis’ problem to solve now. We did, as I predicted in ’02, kick open a hornet’s nest. We’re not able now to put the hornets back in the nest and seal it up. And we had to leave Vietnam and abandon a hell of a lot more people than we’re going to have to abandon now.

The Shiites can certainly look after themselves; I don’t think the majority Shiites need us there to protect them from the Sunnis.

Q: Do you have any thoughts on what might be done that hasn’t been done to advance peace between Israel and the Palestinians?

SEN. HART: I think getting out of Iraq would be step number one. I don’t think there is going to be peace between Israel and the Palestinians so long as we’re in Iraq. Like you and hundreds of others, I’ve struggled with this most of my life. When the chips are down, America’s best

role is that of honest broker, insisting that the radicals on both sides, whether Palestinian or Israeli, not control the policy or the debate, but otherwise doing all we can to get them to the table and keep them at the table, principally to defuse the hardliners on both sides, including in Israel.

Q: Dennis Ross was once quoted as saying that the United States would have to wait ultimately for an Israeli government to emerge that we could work with. Do you have any reaction to that?

SEN. HART: I think that’s a little passive. I think we can play a lot more active role than that, and I think Dennis, on reflection, would agree. It’s tough for us. We are so loathed now in the Arab world that we’ve made it harder for ourselves rather than easier, which raises an interesting question that very few people have asked or seem to want to ask: What have been Israel’s real feelings about America in Iraq? There is so much speculation, and the Israeli government itself has been so quiet on the major issue of our time in the region, that it would be helpful to have a little more candor from the Israelis on what they think we ought to be doing. I’ve got to believe there are a whole lot of Israelis who think the longer the American army is in Iraq, the less progress they’re going to make on their problem. But they need to be heard from.