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In surprise visit to Iraq, Bush envisions possible troop cutbacks but gives no timetable<

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AL-ASAD AIR BASE, Iraq (AP) _ President Bush raised the possibility Monday of U.S. troop cuts in Iraq if security continues to improve, traveling here secretly to assess the war before a showdown with Congress.

The president was joined by his war cabinet and military commanders at an unprecedented meeting in Iraq over eight hours at this dusty military base in the heart of Anbar province, 120 miles west of Baghdad.

Bush did not say how large a troop withdrawal might be possible or whether it might occur before next spring when the first of the additional 30,000 troops he ordered to Iraq this year are to start coming home anyway. He emphasized that any cut would depend upon progress.

After talks with Gen. David Petraeus, the U.S. commander in Iraq, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, Bush said they "tell me if the kind of success we are now seeing continues, it will be possible to maintain the same level of security with fewer American forces."

Bush's trip was a dramatic move to steal the thunder from the Democratic Congress as it returns to Washington with fresh hopes of ending the unpopular war, now in its fifth year. Petraeus and Crocker will testify before lawmakers next week, and then Bush will announce how he intends to proceed in Iraq.

On Air Force One after leaving Iraq, Bush acknowledged that his comment about troop reductions had piqued interest. "Maybe I was intending to do that," the president said, sitting around a table

with reporters in his plane's conference room as he flew to Australia to meet with Asia-Pacific leaders.

"If you look at my comments over the past eight months, it's gone from a security situation in the sense that we're either going to get out and there will be chaos, or more troops," the president said. "Now the situation has changed where I'm able to speculate on the hypothetical."

Still, Bush struck a defiant note about demands for bringing troops home.

Standing before troops cheering "hooah," Bush said decisions on force levels "will be based on a calm assessment by our military commanders on the conditions on the ground _ not a nervous reaction by Washington politicians to poll results in the media.

"In other words," Bush said, "when we begin to draw down troops from Iraq, it will be from a position of strength and success, not from a position of fear and failure."

Once the stronghold of the Sunni Arab insurgency, Anbar province now is cited as a model for the rest of Iraq. Violence abated after Sunni tribal leaders and former insurgents broke with al-Qaida and teamed up with U.S. troops to hunt down extremists.

"Anbar is a huge province," Bush said. "It was once written off as lost. It is now one of the safest places in Iraq."

Defense Secretary Robert Gates said it will take several months to assess whether security improvements across Iraq are sufficient to enable Bush to start withdrawing troops. He provided no details on Bush's thinking about the timing and scope of any reductions.

"I am more optimistic than I have been at any time since I took this job," said Gates.

Bush met with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and other top government officials from Baghdad. He urged the government to respond to progress in Anbar. He also met with Sunni tribal sheiks and members of Anbar's governing body.

Bush spoke warmly about al-Maliki even while expressing frustration over the slow pace of political progress.

"My message to Maliki is: `You've got a lot of work to do and whatever decision is made in Washington, D.C., is all aimed at helping you achieve what is necessary to get the work done.'"

He said he addressed his comments to all the Iraqi leaders at the table but took al-Malki aside. "You're my friend and ... you've made progress in your recent meeting and now's the time to get these laws passed," Bush said he told al-Maliki, referring to a national oil revenue sharing measure and other legislation. "You've got hard work to do and you know what? He understands that."

Al-Maliki, speaking before Bush's visit, said he expected Petraeus and Crocker to give his government a favorable assessment when they report to Congress.

Virtually all of his war advisers joined Bush in Iraq, the first such meeting here. They included Gates, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. William Fallon, the top U.S. commander in the Middle East, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley and Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, Bush's "war czar."

It was Bush's third secret trip to Iraq in four years. He slipped unnoticed out of the White House on Sunday evening and was driven to Andrews Air Force Base to board his plane. Only one other car accompanied him. Bush was to have left Monday morning for Australia.

Bush urged Congress to wait until they hear from Crocker and Petraeus before judging the result of his decision to send 30,000 more troops to Iraq.

"I urge members of both parties in Congress to listen to what they have to say," he said. "We shouldn't jump to conclusions until the general and the ambassador report."

Bush said Monday's visit would have no impact on the mood in Congress. "I don't think a presidential visit will cause people to vote one way or another."

Even Republicans are pressuring Bush on troop cuts. Republican Sen. John Warner surprised the White House by declaring over the summer congressional break that he wants some

U.S. troops to start coming home from Iraq by Christmas. He said he may support Democratic legislation ordering withdrawals if Bush refuses to set a return timetable soon.

Anticipating criticism that Bush's trip was a media event to buttress support for his war strategy, the White House was ready to push back.

"There are some people who might try to deride this trip as a photo opportunity," said White House deputy press secretary Dana Perino. "We wholeheartedly disagree."

Hadley said Bush wanted to hear personally from commanders and from al-Maliki himself.

"There is no substitute for sitting down, looking him in the eye, and having a conversation with him," Hadley said. "The president felt this is something he had to do in order to put himself in a position to make some important decisions."

There are now 162,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, including 30,000 that arrived since February as part of Bush's revised strategy to provide security so Iraqi leaders could build a unity government.