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Newsroom

Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Turning the Page in Iraq

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A few months ago, I met a woman who told me her nephew was leaving for Iraq. As she started to tell me about how much she'd miss him and how worried she was about him, she began to cry. "I can't breathe," she said. "I want to know when I am going to be able to breathe again."

I have her on my mind when I think about what we've gone through as a country and where we need to go. Because we've been holding our breath over Iraq for five years. As we go through yet another debate about yet another phase of this misguided war, we've got a familiar feeling. Again, we're told that progress is upon us. Again, we're asked to hold our breath a little longer. Again, we're reminded of what's gone wrong with our policies and our politics.

It was five years ago today - on September 12, 2002 - that President Bush made his case for war at the United Nations. Standing in front of a world that stood with us after 9/11, he said, "In the attacks on America a year ago, we saw the destructive intentions of our enemies." Then he talked about Saddam Hussein - a man who had nothing to do with 9/11. But citing the lesson of 9/11, he and others said we had to act. "To suggest otherwise," the President said, "is to hope against the evidence."

George Bush was wrong. The people who attacked us on 9/11 were in Afghanistan, not Iraq. Al Qaeda in Iraq didn't exist before our invasion. The case for war was built on exaggerated fears and empty evidence - so much so that Bob Graham, the Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, decided to vote against the war after he read the National Intelligence Estimate.

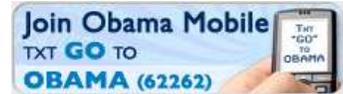
But conventional thinking in Washington lined up for war. The pundits judged the political winds to be blowing in the direction of the President. Despite - or perhaps because of how much experience they had in Washington, too many politicians feared looking weak and failed to ask hard questions. Too many took the President at his word instead of reading the intelligence for themselves. Congress gave the President the authority to go to war. Our only opportunity to stop the war was lost.

I made a different judgment. I thought our priority had to be finishing the fight in Afghanistan. I spoke out against what I called "a rash war" in Iraq. I worried about, "an occupation of undetermined length, with undetermined costs, and undetermined consequences." The full accounting of those costs and consequences will only be known to history. But the picture is beginning to come into focus.

Nearly 4,000 Americans have been killed in Iraq. Five times that number have suffered horrible wounds, seen and unseen. Loved ones have been lost, dreams denied. Children will grow up without fathers and mothers. Parents have outlived their children. That is a cost of this war.

When all is said and done, the price-tag will run over a trillion dollars. A trillion dollars. That's money not spent on homeland security and counter-terrorism; on providing health care to all Americans and a world-class education to every child; on investments in energy to save ourselves and our planet from an addiction to oil. That is a cost of this war.

The excellence of our military is unmatched. But as a result of this war, our forces are under



pressure as never before. Our National Guard and reserves have half of the equipment they need to respond to emergencies at home and abroad. Retention among West Point graduates is down. Our powers of deterrence and influence around the world are down. That is a cost of this war.

America's standing has suffered. Our diplomacy has been compromised by a refusal to talk to people we don't like. Our alliances have been compromised by bluster. Our credibility has been compromised by a faulty case for war. Our moral leadership has been compromised by Abu Ghraib. That is a cost of this war.

Perhaps the saddest irony of the Administration's cynical use of 9/11 is that the Iraq War has left us less safe than we were before 9/11. Osama bin Ladin and his top lieutenants have rebuilt a new base in Pakistan where they freely train recruits, plot new attacks, and disseminate propaganda. The Taliban is resurgent in Afghanistan. Iran has emerged as the greatest strategic challenge to America in the Middle East in a generation. Violent extremism has increased. Terrorism has increased. All of that is a cost of this war.

After 9/11, instead of the politics of unity, we got a political strategy of division with the war in Iraq as its centerpiece. The only thing we were asked to do for our country was support a misguided war. We lost that sense of common purpose as Americans. And we're not going to be a truly united and resolute America until we can stop holding our breath, until we can come together to reclaim our foreign policy and our politics and end this war that has cost us so much.

So there is something unreal about the debate that's taking place in Washington.

With all that our troops and their families have sacrificed, with all this war has cost us, and with no discernible end in sight, the same people who told us we would be greeted as liberators, about democracy spreading across the Middle East, about striking a decisive blow against terrorism, about an insurgency in its last throes - those same people are now trumpeting the uneven and precarious containment of brutal sectarian violence as if it validates all of their failed decisions.

The bar for success is so low that it is almost buried in the sand.

The American people have had enough of the shifting spin. We've had enough of extended deadlines for benchmarks that go unmet. We've had enough of mounting costs in Iraq and missed opportunities around the world. We've had enough of a war that should never have been authorized and should never have been waged.

I opposed this war from the beginning. I opposed the war in 2002. I opposed it in 2003. I opposed it in 2004. I opposed it in 2005. I opposed it in 2006. I introduced a plan in January to remove all of our combat brigades by next March. And I am here to say that we have to begin to end this war now.

My plan for ending the war would turn the page in Iraq by removing our combat troops from Iraq's civil war; by taking a new approach to press for a new accord on reconciliation within Iraq; by talking to all of Iraq's neighbors to press for a compact in the region; and by confronting the human costs of this war.

First, we need to immediately begin the responsible removal of our troops from Iraq's civil war. Our troops have performed brilliantly. They brought Saddam Hussein to justice. They have fought for over four years to give Iraqis a chance for a better future. But they cannot - and should not - bear the responsibility for resolving the grievances at the heart of Iraq's civil war.

Recent news only confirms this. The Administration points to selective statistics to make the case for staying the course. Killings and mortar attacks and car bombs in certain districts are down from the highest levels we've seen. But they're still at the same horrible levels they were at 18 months ago or two years ago. Experts will tell you that the killings are down in some places because the ethnic cleansing has already taken place. That's hardly a cause for triumphalism.

The stated purpose of the surge was to enable Iraq's leaders to reconcile. But as the recent report from the Government Accountability Office confirms, the Iraqis are not reconciling. Our troops fight and die in the 120 degree heat to give Iraq's leaders space to agree, but they aren't filling it. They are not moving beyond their centuries-old sectarian conflicts, they are falling further back into them.

We hear a lot about how violence is down in parts of Anbar province. But this has little to do

with the surge - it's because Sunni tribal leaders made a political decision to turn against al Qaeda in Iraq. This only underscores the point - the solution in Iraq is political, it is not military.

Violence is contained in some parts of Baghdad. That's no surprise. Our troops have cleared these neighborhoods at great costs. But our troops cannot police Baghdad indefinitely - only Iraqis can. Rather than use our presence to make progress, the Iraqi government has put off taking responsibility - that's the finding of a Commission headed by General Jim Jones. And our troop presence cannot be sustained without crippling our military's ability to respond to other contingencies.

Let me be clear: there is no military solution in Iraq, and there never was. The best way to protect our security and to pressure Iraq's leaders to resolve their civil war is to immediately begin to remove our combat troops. Not in six months or one year - now.

We should enter into talks with the Iraqi government to discuss the process of our drawdown. We must get out strategically and carefully, removing troops from secure areas first, and keeping troops in more volatile areas until later. But our drawdown should proceed at a steady pace of one or two brigades each month. If we start now, all of our combat brigades should be out of Iraq by the end of next year.

We will need to retain some forces in Iraq and the region. We'll continue to strike at al Qaeda in Iraq. We'll protect our forces as they leave, and we will continue to protect U.S. diplomats and facilities. If - but only if - Iraq makes political progress and their security forces are not sectarian, we should continue to train and equip those forces. But we will set our own direction and our own pace, and our direction must be out of Iraq. The future of our military, our foreign policy, and our national purpose cannot be hostage to the inaction of the Iraqi government.

Removing our troops is part of applying real pressure on Iraq's leaders to end their civil war. Some argue that we should just replace Prime Minister Maliki. But that wouldn't solve the problem. We shouldn't be in the business of supporting coups. And remember - before Maliki, we said that we just needed to replace the last Prime Minister to make everything all right. It didn't work.

The problems in Iraq are bigger than one man. Iraq needs a new Constitutional convention that would include representatives from all levels of Iraqi society - in and out of government. The United Nations should play a central role in convening and participating in this convention, which should not adjourn until a new accord on national reconciliation is reached. To reconcile, the Iraqis must also meet key political benchmarks outside of the Constitutional process, including new local elections and revising deBaathification.

Now the Iraqis may come out of this process choosing some kind of soft partition into three regions - one Sunni, one Shia, one Kurd. But it must be their choice. America should not impose the division of Iraq.

While we change the dynamic within Iraq, we must surge our diplomacy in the region.

At every stage of this war, we have suffered because of disdain for diplomacy. We have not brought allies to the table. We have refused to talk to people we don't like. And we have failed to build a consensus in the region. As a result, Iraq is more violent, the region is less stable, and America is less secure.

We need to launch the most aggressive diplomatic effort in recent history to reach a new compact in the region. This effort should include all of Iraq's neighbors, and we should also bring in the United Nations Security Council. All of us have a stake in Iraq's stability. It's time to make this less about what America is trying to do for Iraq, and more about what the world can do with Iraq.

This compact must secure Iraq's borders, keep neighbors from meddling, isolate al Qaeda, and support Iraq's unity. That means helping our Turkish and Kurdish friends reach an understanding. That means pressing Sunni states like Saudi Arabia to stop the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq, increase their financial support of reconstruction efforts, and encourage Iraqi Sunnis to reconcile with their fellow Iraqis. And that means turning the page on the Bush-Cheney policy of not talking to Syria and Iran.

Conventional thinking in Washington says Presidents cannot lead this diplomacy. But I think the American people know better. Not talking doesn't make us look tough - it makes us look arrogant. And it doesn't get results. Strong Presidents tell their adversaries where they stand, and that's what I would do. That's how tough and principled diplomacy works. And that's what

we need to press Syria and Iran to stop being part of the problem in Iraq.

Iran poses a grave challenge. It builds a nuclear program, supports terrorism, and threatens Israel with destruction. But we hear eerie echoes of the run-up to the war in Iraq in the way that the President and Vice President talk about Iran. They conflate Iran and al Qaeda, ignoring the violent schism that exists between Shiite and Sunni militants. They issue veiled threats. They suggest that the time for diplomacy and pressure is running out when we haven't even tried direct diplomacy. Well George Bush and Dick Cheney must hear - loud and clear - from the American people and the Congress: you don't have our support, and you don't have our authorization for another war.

George Bush suggests that there are two choices with regard to Iran. Stay the course in Iraq or cede the region to the Iran. I reject this choice. Keeping our troops tied down in Iraq is not the way to weaken Iran - it's precisely what has strengthened it. President Ahmadinejad may talk about filling a vacuum in the region after an American drawdown, but he's badly mistaken. It's time for a new and robust American leadership. And that should begin with a new cooperative security framework with all of our friends and allies in the Persian Gulf.

Now is the time for tough and sustained diplomacy backed by real pressure. It's time to rally the region and the world to our side. And it's time to deliver a direct message to Tehran. America is a part of a community of nations. America wants peace in the region. You can give up your nuclear ambitions and support for terror and rejoin the community of nations. Or you will face further isolation, including much tighter sanctions. As we deliver this message, we will be stronger - not weaker - if we are disengaging from Iraq's civil war.

The final part of my plan is a major international initiative to address Iraq's humanitarian crisis.

President Bush likes to warn of the dire consequences of ending the war. He warns of rising Iranian influence, but that has already taken place. He warns of growing terrorism, but that has already taken place. And he warns of huge movements of refugees and mass sectarian killing, but that has already taken place. These are not the consequences of a future withdrawal. They are the reality of Iraq's present. They are a direct consequence of waging this war. Two million Iraqis are displaced in their own country. Another two million Iraqis have fled as refugees to neighboring countries. This mass movement of people is a threat to the security of the Middle East and to our common humanity. We have a strategic interest - and a moral obligation - to act.

The President would have us believe there are two choices: keep all of our troops in Iraq or abandon these Iraqis. I reject that choice. We cannot continue to put this burden on our troops alone. I'm tired of this notion that we either fight foolish wars or retreat from the world. We are better than that as a nation.

There's no military solution that can reunite a family or resettle an orphaned child. It's time to form an international working group with the countries in the region, our European and Asian friends, and the United Nations. The State Department says it has invested \$183 million on displaced Iraqis this year -- but that is not nearly enough. We can and must do more. We should up our share to at least \$2 billion to support this effort; to expand access to social services for refugees in neighboring countries; and to ensure that Iraqis displaced inside their own country can find safe-haven.

Iraqis must know that those who engage in mass violence will be brought to justice. We should lead in forming a commission at the U.N. to monitor and hold accountable perpetrators of war crimes within Iraq. We must also put strict conditions on U.S. assistance to direct our support to those who want to hold Iraq together - not those who are tearing it apart. The risk of greater atrocities in the short-term cannot deter us from doing what we must to minimize violence in the long-term. Yet as we drawdown, we must declare our readiness to intervene with allies to stop genocidal violence.

We must also keep faith with Iraqis who kept faith with us. One tragic outcome of this war is that the Iraqis who stood with America - the interpreters, embassy workers, and subcontractors - are being targeted for assassination. An Iraqi named Laith who worked for an American organization told a journalist, "Sometimes I feel like we're standing in line for a ticket, waiting to die." And yet our doors are shut. In April, we admitted exactly one Iraqi refugee - just one!

That is not how we treat our friends. That is not how we take responsibility for our own actions. That is not who we are as Americans. It's time to at least fill the 7,000 slots that we pledged to Iraqi refugees and to be open to accepting even more Iraqis at risk. It's also time to go to our friends and allies - and all the members of our original coalition in Iraq - to find

homes for the many Iraqis who are in desperate need of asylum.

Keeping this moral obligation is a key part of how we turn the page in Iraq. Because what's at stake is bigger than this war - it's our global leadership. Now is a time to be bold. We must not stay the course or take the conventional path because the other course is unknown. To quote Dr. Brzezinski - we must not allow ourselves to become "prisoners of uncertainty."

George Bush is afraid of this future. That is why all he can do is drag up the past. After all the flawed justifications for his failed policy, he now invokes Vietnam as a reason to stay in Iraq. Let's put aside the strange reasoning - that all would have been well if we had just stayed the course in Vietnam. Let's put it aside and leave it where it belongs - in the past.

Now is not the time to reargue the Vietnam War - we did that in the 2004 election, and it wasn't pretty. I come from a new generation of Americans. I don't want to fight the battles of the 1960s. I want to reclaim the future for America, because we have too many threats to face and too many opportunities to seize. Just think about what we can accomplish together when we end this war.

When we end this war in Iraq, we can finally finish the fight in Afghanistan. That is why I propose stepping up our commitment there, with at least two additional combat brigades and a comprehensive program of aid and support to help Afghans help themselves.

When we end this war in Iraq, we can more effectively tackle the twin demons of extremism and hopelessness that threaten the peace of the world and the security of America. That is why I have proposed a program to spread hope - not hate - in the Islamic world, to build schools that teach young people to build and not destroy, to support the rule of law and economic development, and to launch a program of outreach to the Islamic world that I will lead as President.

When we end this war in Iraq, we can once again lead the world against the common challenges of the 21st century. Against the spread of nuclear weapons and climate change. Against genocide in Darfur. Against ignorance and intolerance. Corruption and greed. Poverty and despair. When we end this war, we can reclaim the cause of freedom and democracy. We can be that beacon of hope, that light to all the world.

When we end this war, we can recapture our unity of effort as Americans. The American people have the right instincts on Iraq. It's time to heed their judgment. It's time to move beyond Iraq so that we can move forward together. I will be a President who listens to the American people, not a President who ignores them.

And when we end the war in Iraq, we can come together to give our full attention to advancing the cause of health care for every American, an energy policy that does not bankroll hostile nations while we melt the polar ice caps, and a world class education for our children. Above all, we can turn the page to a new kind of politics of unity, not division; of hope, not fear.

You know, I welcome all of the folks who have changed their position on the war over these last months and years. And we need more of those votes to change if we're going to change the direction of this war. That is why I will keep speaking directly to my colleagues in the Congress, both Republican and Democratic. Historically, we have come together in a bipartisan way to deal with our most monumental challenges. We should do so again. We have the power to do this - not as Republicans or Democrats, but as Americans. We don't have to wait until George Bush is gone from office - we can begin to end this war today, right now.

But if we have learned anything from Iraq, it is that the judgment that matters most is the judgment that is made first.

Martin Luther King once stood up at Riverside Church and said, "In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late." We are too late to stop a war that should never have been fought; too late to undo the pain of battle, the anguish of so many families, or the price of the fight; too late to redo the years of division and distraction at home and abroad.

But I'm here today because it's not too late to come together as Americans. Because we're not going to be able to deal with the challenges that confront us until we end this war. What we can do is say that we will not be prisoners of uncertainty. That we reject the conventional thinking that led us into Iraq and that didn't ask hard questions until it was too late. What we can say is that we are ready for something new and something bold and something principled.

It's time for us to breathe again. That begins with ending this war - but it does not end there. It's time to reclaim our foreign policy. It's time to reclaim our politics. And it's time to lead this country - and this world - again, to a new dawn of peace and unity.

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