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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: The World Beyond Iraq

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Just before America's entry into World War I, President Woodrow Wilson addressed Congress: "It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war," he said. "...But the right is more precious than peace." Wilson's words captured two awesome responsibilities that test any Commander-in-Chief - to never hesitate to defend America, but to never go to war unless you must. War is sometimes necessary, but it has grave consequences, and the judgment to go to war can never be undone.

Five years ago today, President George W. Bush addressed the nation. Bombs had started to rain down on Baghdad. War was necessary, the President said, because the United States could not, "live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder." Recalling the pain of 9/11, he said the price of inaction in Iraq was to meet the threat with "armies of fire fighters and police and doctors on the streets of our cities."

At the time the President uttered those words, there was no hard evidence that Iraq had those stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. There was not any evidence that Iraq was responsible for the attacks of September 11, or that Iraq had operational ties to the al Qaeda terrorists who carried them out. By launching a war based on faulty premises and bad intelligence, President Bush failed Wilson's test. So did Congress when it voted to give him the authority to wage war.

Five years have gone by since that fateful decision. This war has now lasted longer than World War I, World War II, or the Civil War. Nearly four thousand Americans have given their lives. Thousands more have been wounded. Even under the best case scenarios, this war will cost American taxpayers well over a trillion dollars. And where are we for all of this sacrifice? We are less safe and less able to shape events abroad. We are divided at home, and our alliances around the world have been strained. The threats of a new century have roiled the waters of peace and stability, and yet America remains anchored in Iraq.

History will catalog the reasons why we waged a war that didn't need to be fought, but two stand out. In 2002, when the fateful decisions about Iraq were made, there was a President for whom ideology overrode pragmatism, and there were too many politicians in Washington who spent too little time reading the intelligence reports, and too much time reading public opinion. The lesson of Iraq is that when we are making decisions about matters as grave as war, we need a policy rooted in reason and facts, not ideology and politics.

Now we are debating who should be our next Commander in Chief. And I am running for President because it's time to turn the page on a failed ideology and a fundamentally flawed political strategy, so that we can make pragmatic judgments to keep our country safe. That's what I did when I stood up and opposed this war from the start, and said that we needed to finish the fight against al Qaeda. And that's what I'll do as President of the United States.

Senator Clinton says that she and Senator McCain have passed a "Commander in Chief test" - not because of the judgments they've made, but because of the years they've spent in Washington. She made a similar argument when she said her vote for war was based on her experience at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. But here is the stark reality: there is a security gap in this country - a gap between

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the rhetoric of those who claim to be tough on terrorism and the reality of growing insecurity caused by their decisions. A gap between Washington experience, and the wisdom of Washington's judgments. A gap between the rhetoric of those who tout their support for our troops, and the overburdened state of our military.

It is time to have a debate with John McCain about the future of our national security. And the way to win that debate is not to compete with John McCain over who has more experience in Washington, because that's a contest that he'll win. The way to win a debate with John McCain is not to talk, and act, and vote like him on national security, because then we all lose. The way to win that debate and to keep America safe is to offer a clear contrast, and that's what I will do when I am the nominee of the Democratic Party - because since before this war in Iraq began, I have made different judgments, I have a different vision, and I will offer a clean break from the failed policies and politics of the past.

Nowhere is that break more badly needed than in Iraq.

In the year since President Bush announced the surge - the bloodiest year of the war for America - the level of violence in Iraq has been reduced. Our troops - including so many from Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base - have done a brilliant job under difficult circumstances. Yet while we have a General who has used improved tactics to reduce violence, we still have the wrong strategy. As General Petraeus has himself acknowledged, the Iraqis are not achieving the political progress needed to end their civil war. Beyond Iraq, our military is badly overstretched, and we have neither the strategy nor resources to deal with nearly every other national security challenge we face.

This is why the judgment that matters most on Iraq - and on any decision to deploy military force - is the judgment made first. If you believe we are fighting the right war, then the problems we face are purely tactical in nature. That is what Senator McCain wants to discuss - tactics. What he and the Administration have failed to present is an overarching strategy: how the war in Iraq enhances our long-term security, or will in the future. That's why this Administration cannot answer the simple question posed by Senator John Warner in hearings last year: Are we safer because of this war? And that is why Senator McCain can argue - as he did last year - that we couldn't leave Iraq because violence was up, and then argue this year that we can't leave Iraq because violence is down.

When you have no overarching strategy, there is no clear definition of success. Success comes to be defined as the ability to maintain a flawed policy indefinitely. Here is the truth: fighting a war without end will not force the Iraqis to take responsibility for their own future. And fighting in a war without end will not make the American people safer.

So when I am Commander-in-Chief, I will set a new goal on Day One: I will end this war. Not because politics compels it. Not because our troops cannot bear the burden- as heavy as it is. But because it is the right thing to do for our national security, and it will ultimately make us safer.

In order to end this war responsibly, I will immediately begin to remove our troops from Iraq. We can responsibly remove 1 to 2 combat brigades each month. If we start with the number of brigades we have in Iraq today, we can remove all of them 16 months. After this redeployment, we will leave enough troops in Iraq to guard our embassy and diplomats, and a counter-terrorism force to strike al Qaeda if it forms a base that the Iraqis cannot destroy. What I propose is not - and never has been - a precipitous drawdown. It is instead a detailed and prudent plan that will end a war nearly seven years after it started.

My plan to end this war will finally put pressure on Iraq's leaders to take responsibility for their future. Because we've learned that when we tell Iraq's leaders that we'll stay as long as it takes, they take as long as they want. We need to send a different message. We will help Iraq reach a meaningful accord on national reconciliation. We will engage with every country in the region - and the UN - to support the stability and territorial integrity of Iraq. And we will launch a major humanitarian initiative to support Iraq's refugees and people. But Iraqis must take responsibility for their country. It is precisely this kind of approach - an approach that puts the onus on the Iraqis, and that relies on more than just military power - that is needed to stabilize Iraq.

Let me be clear: ending this war is not going to be easy. There will be dangers involved. We will have to make tactical adjustments, listening to our commanders on the ground, to ensure that our interests in a stable Iraq are met, and to make sure that our troops are secure. Senator Clinton has tried to use my position to score political points, suggesting that I am somehow less committed to ending the war. She makes this argument despite the fact that she has taken the same position in the past. So ask yourself: who do you trust to end a war - someone who opposed the war from the beginning, or someone who started opposing it when they started preparing a run for President?

Now we know what we'll hear from those like John McCain who support open-ended war. They will argue that leaving Iraq is surrender. That we are emboldening the enemy. These are the mistaken and misleading arguments we hear from those who have failed to demonstrate how the war in Iraq has made us safer. Just yesterday, we heard Senator McCain confuse Sunni and Shiite, Iran and al Qaeda. Maybe that is why he voted to go to war with a country that had no al Qaeda ties. Maybe that is why he completely fails to understand that the war in Iraq has done more to embolden America's enemies than any strategic choice that we have made in decades.

The war in Iraq has emboldened Iran, which poses the greatest challenge to American interests in the

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Middle East in a generation, continuing its nuclear program and threatening our ally, Israel. Instead of the new Middle East we were promised, Hamas runs Gaza, Hizbollah flags fly from the rooftops in Sadr City, and Iran is handing out money left and right in southern Lebanon.

The war in Iraq has emboldened North Korea, which built new nuclear weapons and even tested one before the Administration finally went against its own rhetoric, and pursued diplomacy.

The war in Iraq has emboldened the Taliban, which has rebuilt its strength since we took our eye off of Afghanistan.

Above all, the war in Iraq has emboldened al Qaeda, whose recruitment has jumped and whose leadership enjoys a safe-haven in Pakistan - a thousand miles from Iraq.

The central front in the war against terror is not Iraq, and it never was. What more could America's enemies ask for than an endless war where they recruit new followers and try out new tactics on a battlefield so far from their base of operations? That is why my presidency will shift our focus. Rather than fight a war that does not need to be fought, we need to start fighting the battles that need to be won on the central front of the war against al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This is the area where the 9/11 attacks were planned. This is where Osama bin Laden and his top lieutenants still hide. This is where extremism poses its greatest threat. Yet in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, we have pursued flawed strategies that are too distant from the needs of the people, and too timid in pursuit of our common enemies.

It may not dominate the evening news, but in Afghanistan, last year was the most deadly since 2001. Suicide attacks are up. Casualties are up. Corruption and drug trafficking are rampant. Neither the government nor the legal economy can meet the needs of the Afghan people.

It is not too late to prevail in Afghanistan. But we cannot prevail until we reduce our commitment in Iraq, which will allow us to do what I called for last August - providing at least two additional combat brigades to support our efforts in Afghanistan. This increased commitment in turn can be used to leverage greater assistance - with fewer restrictions - from our NATO allies. It will also allow us to invest more in training Afghan security forces, including more joint NATO operations with the Afghan Army, and a national police training plan that is effectively coordinated and resourced.

A stepped up military commitment must be backed by a long-term investment in the Afghan people. We will start with an additional \$1 billion in non military assistance each year - aid that is focused on reaching ordinary Afghans. We need to improve daily life by supporting education, basic infrastructure and human services. We have to counter the opium trade by supporting alternative livelihoods for Afghan farmers. And we must call on more support from friends and allies, and better coordination under a strong international coordinator.

To succeed in Afghanistan, we also need to fundamentally rethink our Pakistan policy. For years, we have supported stability over democracy in Pakistan, and gotten neither. The core leadership of al Qaeda has a safe-haven in Pakistan. The Taliban are able to strike inside Afghanistan and then return to the mountains of the Pakistani border. Throughout Pakistan, domestic unrest has been rising. The full democratic aspirations of the Pakistani people have been too long denied. A child growing up in Pakistan, more often than not, is taught to see America as a source of hate - not hope.

This is why I stood up last summer and said we cannot base our entire Pakistan policy on President Musharraf. Pakistan is our ally, but we do our own security and our ally no favors by supporting its President while we are seen to be ignoring the interests of the people. Our counter-terrorism assistance must be conditioned on Pakistani action to root out the al Qaeda sanctuary. And any U.S. aid not directly needed for the fight against al Qaeda or to invest in the Pakistani people should be conditioned on the full restoration of Pakistan's democracy and rule of law.

The choice is not between Musharraf and Islamic extremists. As the recent legislative elections showed, there is a moderate majority of Pakistanis, and they are the people we need on our side to win the war against al Qaeda. That is why we should dramatically increase our support for the Pakistani people - for education, economic development, and democratic institutions. That child in Pakistan must know that we want a better life for him, that America is on his side, and that his interest in opportunity is our interest as well. That's the promise that America must stand for.

And for his sake and ours, we cannot tolerate a sanctuary for terrorists who threaten America's homeland and Pakistan's stability. If we have actionable intelligence about high-level al Qaeda targets in Pakistan's border region, we must act if Pakistan will not or cannot. Senator Clinton, Senator McCain, and President Bush have all distorted and derided this position, suggesting that I would invade or bomb Pakistan. This is politics, pure and simple. My position, in fact, is the same pragmatic policy that all three of them have belatedly - if tacitly - acknowledged is one we should pursue. Indeed, it was months after I called for this policy that a top al Qaeda leader was taken out in Pakistan by an American aircraft. And remember that the same three individuals who now criticize me for supporting a targeted strike on the terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks, are the same three individuals that supported an invasion of Iraq - a country that had nothing to do with 9/11.

It is precisely this kind of political point-scoring that has opened up the security gap in this country. We

have a security gap when candidates say they will follow Osama bin Laden to the gates of hell, but refuse to follow him where he actually goes. What we need in our next Commander in Chief is not a stubborn refusal to acknowledge reality or empty rhetoric about 3AM phone calls. What we need is a pragmatic strategy that focuses on fighting our real enemies, rebuilding alliances, and renewing our engagement with the world's people.

In addition to freeing up resources to take the fight to al Qaeda, ending the war in Iraq will allow us to more effectively confront other threats in the world - threats that cannot be conquered with an occupying army or dispatched with a single decision in the middle of the night. What lies in the heart of a child in Pakistan matters as much as the airplanes we sell her government. What's in the head of a scientist from Russia can be as lethal as a plutonium reactor in Yongbyon. What's whispered in refugee camps in Chad can be as dangerous as a dictator's bluster. These are the neglected landscapes of the 21st century, where technology and extremism empower individuals just as they give governments the ability to repress them; where the ancient divides of region and religion wash into the swift currents of globalization.

Without American leadership, these threats will fester. With strong American leadership, we can shape them into opportunities to protect our common security and advance our common humanity - for it has always been the genius of American leadership to find opportunity embedded in adversity; to focus on a source of fear, and confront it with hope.

Here are just five ways in which a shift in strategy away from Iraq will help us address the critical challenges of the 21st century.

First, in addressing global terror and violent extremism, we need the kind of comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy I called for last August. We need to strengthen security partnerships to take out terrorist networks, while investing in education and opportunity. We need to give our national security agencies the tools they need, while restoring the adherence to rule of law that helps us win the battle for hearts and minds. This means closing Guantanamo, restoring habeas corpus, and respecting civil liberties. And we need to support the forces of moderation in the Islamic world, so that alliances of convenience mature into friendships of conviction.

Second, the threat of nuclear proliferation must serve as a call to action. I have worked across the aisle with Richard Lugar and Chuck Hagel in the Senate to secure dangerous weapons and loose nuclear materials. And as President, I will secure all loose nuclear materials around the world in my first term, seek deep cuts in global nuclear arsenals, strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and once more seek a world without nuclear weapons.

Third, the danger of weak and failed states risks spreading poverty and refugees; genocide and disease. Now is the time to meet the goal of cutting extreme poverty in half, in part by doubling our foreign assistance while demanding more from those who receive it. And now is the time to build the capacity of regional partners in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and the reconstruction of ravaged societies.

Fourth, the catastrophic consequences of the global climate crisis are matched by the promise of collective action. Now is the time for America to lead, because if we take action, others will act as well. Through our own cap and trade system and investments in new sources of energy, we can end our dependence on foreign oil and gas, and free ourselves from the tyranny of oil-rich states from Saudi Arabia to Russia to Venezuela. We can create millions of new jobs here in America. And we can secure our planet for our children and grandchildren.

And fifth, America's sluggish economy risks ceding our economic prominence to a rising China. Competition has always been a catalyst for American innovation, and now should be no different. We must invest in the education of our children, renew our leadership in science, and advance trade that is not just free, but fair for our workers. We must ensure that America is the economic engine in the 21st century just as we were in the 20th.

I have no illusions that any of this will be easy. But I do know that we can only begin to make these changes when we end the mindset that focuses on Iraq and ignores the rest of the world.

I also know that meeting these new threats will require a President who deploys the power of tough, principled diplomacy. It is time to present a country like Iran with a clear choice. If it abandons its nuclear program, support for terror, and threats to Israel, then Iran can rejoin the community of nations - with all the benefits that entails. If not, Iran will face deeper isolation and steeper sanctions. When we engage directly, we will be in a stronger position to rally real international support for increased pressure. We will also engender more goodwill from the Iranian people. And make no mistake - if and when we ever have to use military force against any country, we must exert the power of American diplomacy first.

Once again, Senator Clinton, Senator McCain, and President Bush have made the same arguments against my position on diplomacy, as if reading from the same political playbook. They say I'll be penciling the world's dictators on to my social calendar. But just as they are misrepresenting my position, they are mistaken in standing up for a policy of not talking that is not working. What I've said is that we cannot seize opportunities to resolve our problems unless we create them. That is what Kennedy did with Khrushchev; what Nixon did with Mao; what Reagan did with Gorbachev. And that is what I will do as President of the United States.

What I have talked about today is a new strategy, a new set of priorities for pursuing our interests in the 21st century. And as President, I will provide the tools required to implement this strategy. When President Truman put the policy of containment in place, he also invested in and organized our government to carry it out - creating the National Security Council and the CIA, and founding NATO. Now, we must upgrade our tools of power to fit a new strategy.

That starts with enhancing the finest military in the history of the world. As Commander in Chief, I will begin by giving a military overstretched by Iraq the support it needs. It is time to reduce the strain on our troops by completing the effort to increase our ground forces by 65,000 soldiers and 27,000 Marines, while ensuring the quality of our troops. In an age marked by technology, it is the people of our military - our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen - who bear the responsibility for complex missions. That is why we need to ensure adequate training and time home between deployments. That is why we need to expand our Special Forces. And that is why we must increase investments in capabilities like civil affairs and training foreign militaries.

But we cannot place the burden of a new national security strategy on our military alone. We must integrate our diplomatic, information, economic and military power. That is why, as soon as I take office, I will call for a National Strategy and Security Review, to help determine a 21st Century inter-agency structure to integrate the elements of our national power.

In addition, I will invest in our civilian capacity to operate alongside our troops in post-conflict zones and on humanitarian and stabilization missions. Instead of shuttering consulates in tough corners of the world, it's time to grow our Foreign Service and to expand USAID. Instead of giving up on the determination of young people to serve, it's time to double the size of our Peace Corps. Instead of letting people learn about America from enemy propaganda, it's time to recruit, train, and send out into the world an America's Voice Corps.

And while we strengthen our own capacity, we must strengthen the capability of the international community. We honor NATO's sacrifice in Afghanistan, but we must strive to make it a larger and more nimble alliance. We must work with powers like Russia and China, but we must also speak up for human rights and democracy - and we can start now by speaking out for the human rights and religious freedom of the people of Tibet. And while we are frustrated by the UN, we must invest in its capability to keep the peace, resolve disputes, monitor disarmament, and support good governance around the world - and that depends on a more engaged United States.

We are at a defining moment in our history.

We can choose the path of unending war and unilateral action, and sap our strength and standing. We can choose the path of disengagement, and cede our leadership. Or, we can meet fear and danger head-on with hope and strength; with common purpose as a united America; and with common cause with old allies and new partners.

What we've seen these last few years is what happens when the rigid ideology and dysfunctional politics of Washington is projected abroad. An ideology that does not fit the shape of the times cannot shape events in foreign countries. A politics that is based on fear and division does not allow us to call on the world to hope, and keeps us from coming together as one people, as one nation, to write the next great chapter in the American story.

We also know that there is another face of America that we have seen these last five years. From down the road at Fort Bragg, our soldiers have gone abroad with a greater sense of common purpose than their leaders in Washington. They have learned the lessons of the 21st century's wars. And they have shown a sense of service and selflessness that represents the very best of the American character.

This must be the election when we stand up and say that we will serve them as well as they have served us. This must be the election when America comes together behind a common purpose on behalf of our security and our values. That is what we do as Americans. It's how we founded a republic based on freedom, and faced down fascism. It's how we defended democracy through a Cold War, and shined a light of hope bright enough to be seen in the darkest corners of the world.

When America leads with principle and pragmatism, hope can triumph over fear. It is time, once again, for America to lead.

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