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Remarks for Senator Barack Obama: The Cost of War

Charleston, WV | March 20, 2008

Five years ago, the war in Iraq began. And on this fifth anniversary, we honor the brave men and women who are serving this nation in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the world. We pay tribute to the sacrifices of their families back home. And a grateful nation mourns the loss of our fallen heroes.

I understand that the first serviceman killed in Iraq was a native West Virginian, Marine 1st Lieutenant Shane Childers, who died five years ago tomorrow. And so on this anniversary, my thoughts and prayers go out to Lieutenant Childers' family, and to all who've lost loved ones in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The costs of war are greatest for the troops and those who love them, but we know that war has other costs as well. Yesterday, I addressed some of these other costs in a speech on the strategic consequences of the Iraq war. I spoke about how this war has diverted us from fighting al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and from addressing the other challenges of the 21st Century: violent extremism and nuclear weapons; climate change and poverty; genocide and disease.

And today, I want to talk about another cost of this war - the toll it has taken on our economy. Because at a time when we're on the brink of recession - when neighborhoods have For Sale signs outside every home, and working families are struggling to keep up with rising costs - ordinary Americans are paying a price for this war.

When you're spending over \$50 to fill up your car because the price of oil is four times what it was before Iraq, you're paying a price for this war.

When Iraq is costing each household about \$100 a month, you're paying a price for this war.

When a National Guard unit is over in Iraq and can't help out during a hurricane in Louisiana or with floods here in West Virginia, our communities are paying a price for this war.

And the price our families and communities are paying reflects the price America is paying. The most conservative estimates say that Iraq has now cost more than half a trillion dollars, more than any other war in our history besides World War II. Some say the true cost is even higher and that by the time it's over, this could be a \$3 trillion war.

But what no one disputes is that the cost of this war is far higher than what we were told it would be. We were told this war would cost \$50 to \$60 billion, and that reconstruction would pay for itself out of Iraqi oil profits. We were told higher estimates were nothing but "baloney." Like so much else about this war, we were not told the truth.

What no one disputes is that the costs of this war have been compounded by its careless and incompetent execution - from the billions that have vanished in Iraq to the billions more in no-bid contracts for reckless contractors like Halliburton.

What no one disputes is that five years into this war, soldiers up at Fort Drum are having to wait more than a month to get their first mental health screening - even though we know that incidences of PTSD skyrocket between the second, third, and fourth tours of duty. We have a sacred trust to our troops and our veterans, and we have to live up to it.

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What no one disputes is that President Bush has done what no other President has ever done, and given tax cuts to the rich in a time of war. John McCain once opposed these tax cuts - he rightly called them unfair and fiscally irresponsible. But now he has done an about face and wants to make them permanent, just like he wants a permanent occupation in Iraq. No matter what the costs, no matter what the consequences, John McCain seems determined to carry out a third Bush-term.

That's an outcome America can't afford. Because of the Bush-McCain policies, our debt has ballooned. This is creating problems in our fragile economy. And that kind of debt also places an unfair burden on our children and grandchildren, who will have to repay it.

It also means we're having to pay for this war with loans from China. Having China as our banker isn't good for our economy, it isn't good for our global leadership, and it isn't good for our national security. History teaches us that for a nation to remain a preeminent military power, it must remain a preeminent economic power. That is why it is so important to manage the costs of war wisely.

This is a lesson that the first President Bush understood. The conduct of the Gulf War cost America less than \$20 billion - what we pay in two months in Iraq today. That's because that war was prosecuted on solid grounds, and in a responsible way, and with the support of allies, who paid most of the costs. None of this has been the case in the way George W. Bush and John McCain have waged the current Iraq war.

Now, at that debate in Texas several weeks ago, Senator Clinton attacked John McCain for supporting the policies that have led to our enormous war costs. But her point would have been more compelling had she not joined Senator McCain in making the tragically ill-considered decision to vote for the Iraq war in the first place.

The truth is, this is all part of the reason I opposed this war from the start. It's why I said back in 2002 that it could lead to an occupation not just of undetermined length or undetermined consequences, but of undetermined costs. It's why I've said this war should have never been authorized and never been waged.

Now, let me be clear: when I am President, I will spare no expense to ensure that our troops have the equipment and support they need. There is no higher obligation for a Commander-in-Chief. But we also have to understand that the more than \$10 billion we're spending each month in Iraq is money we could be investing here at home. Just think about what battles we could be fighting instead of fighting this misguided war.

Instead of fighting this war, we could be fighting the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11 and who are plotting against us in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We could be securing our homeland and stopping the world's most dangerous weapons from falling into terrorist hands.

Instead of fighting this war, we could be fighting for the people of West Virginia. For what folks in this state have been spending on the Iraq war, we could be giving health care to nearly 450,000 of your neighbors, hiring nearly 30,000 new elementary school teachers, and making college more affordable for over 300,000 students.

We could be fighting to put the American dream within reach for every American - by giving tax breaks to working families, offering relief to struggling homeowners, reversing President Bush's cuts to the Manufacturing Extension Partnership, and protecting Social Security today, tomorrow, and forever. That's what we could be doing instead of fighting this war.

Instead of fighting this war, we could be fighting to make universal health care a reality in this country. We could be fighting for the young woman who works the night shift after a full day of college and still can't afford medicine for a sister who's ill. For what we spend in several months in Iraq, we could be providing them with the quality, affordable health care that every American deserves.

Instead of fighting this war, we could be fighting to give every American a quality education. We could be fighting for the young men and women all across this country who dream big dreams but aren't getting the kind of education they need to reach for those dreams. For a fraction of what we're spending each year in Iraq, we could be giving our teachers more pay and more support, rebuilding our crumbling schools, and offering a tax credit to put a college degree within reach for anyone who wants one.

Instead of fighting this war, we could be fighting to rebuild our roads and bridges. I've proposed a fund that would do just that and generate nearly two million new jobs - many in the construction industry that's been hard hit by our housing crisis. And it would cost just six percent of what we spend each year in Iraq.

Instead of fighting this war, we could be freeing ourselves from the tyranny of oil, and saving this planet for our children. We could be investing in renewable sources of energy, and in clean coal technology, and creating up to 5 million new green jobs in the bargain, including new clean coal jobs. And we could be doing it all for the cost of less than a year and a half in Iraq.

These are the investments we could be making, all within the parameters of a more responsible and disciplined budget. This is the future we could be building. And that is why I will bring this war to an end when I'm President of the United States of America.



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But we also know that even after this war comes to an end, the costs of this war will not. We'll have to keep our sacred trust with our veterans and fully fund the VA. We'll have to look after our wounded warriors - whether they're suffering from wounds seen or unseen. That must include the signature injuries of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - not just PTSD, but Traumatic Brain Injury. We'll have to give veterans the health care and disability benefits they deserve, the support they need, and the respect they've earned. This is an obligation I have fought to uphold on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee by joining Jay Rockefeller to expand educational opportunities for our veterans. It's an obligation I will uphold as President, and it's an obligation that will endure long after this war is over.

And our obligation to rebuild our military will endure as well. This war has stretched our military to its limits, wearing down troops and equipment as a result of tour after tour after tour of duty. The Army has said it will need \$13 billion a year just to replace and repair all the equipment that's been broken or lost. So in the coming years we won't just have to restore our military to its peak level of readiness, and we won't just have to make sure our National Guard is back to being fully prepared to handle a domestic crisis, we'll also have to ensure that our soldiers are trained and equipped to confront the new threats of the 21 century and that our military can meet any challenge around the world. And that is a responsibility I intend to meet as Commander-in-Chief.

So we know what this war has cost us - in blood and in treasure. But in the words of Robert Kennedy, "past error is no excuse for its own perpetuation." And yet, John McCain refuses to learn from the failures of the Bush years. Instead of offering an exit strategy for Iraq, he's offering us a 100-year occupation. Instead of offering an economic plan that works for working Americans, he's supporting tax cuts for the wealthiest among us who don't need them and aren't asking for them. Senator McCain is embracing the failed policies of the past, but America is ready to embrace the future.

When I am your nominee, the American people will have a real choice in November - between change and more of the same, between giving the Bush policies another four years, or bringing them to an end. And that is the choice the American people deserve.

Somewhere in Baghdad today, a soldier is stepping into his Humvee and heading out on a patrol. That soldier knows the cost of war. He's been bearing it for five years. It's the cost of being kept awake at night by the whistle of falling mortars. It's the cost of a heart that aches for a loved one back home, and a family that's counting the days until the next R&R. It's the cost of losing a friend, who asked for nothing but to serve his country.

How much longer are we going to ask our troops to bear the cost of this war?

How much longer are we going to ask our families and our communities to bear the cost of this war?

When are we going to stop mortgaging our children's future for Washington's mistake?

This election is our chance to reclaim our future - to end the fight in Iraq and take up the fight for good jobs and universal health care. To end the fight in Iraq and take up the fight for a world-class education and retirement security. To end the fight in Iraq and take up the fight for opportunity, and equality, and prosperity here at home.

Those are the battles we need to fight. That is the leadership I want to offer. And that is the future we can build together when I'm President of the United States. Thank you.

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