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Barack Obama

Senate Floor Speech on the Iraq War After 4 Years



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Thank you very much, Mr. President.

Mr. President, on Thursdays Senator Durbin and I hold a constituent coffee so we can hear from the folks back home. A young man came a few months ago who was about 25, 26 years old. He had been back from Iraq for a year. The first six months of that year had been spent in a coma. An explosion had shattered his face, blinded him in both eyes, has left him without the use of one arm.

He talked to us about how he was going through rehab. He introduced us to his family. He has a wife and two young daughters like I do, and his wife talked for a bit about the adjustments they were making at home since dad got hurt. And I found myself looking at not just him, but his wife, who loves him so much. And I thought about how their lives were forever changed because of the decision that was carried out four years ago.

The sacrifices of war are immeasurable. I first made this point in the fall of 2002, at the end of the speech that I gave opposing the invasion of Iraq. I said then that I certainly do not oppose all wars. Rather, I oppose dumb wars, rash wars, wars that are based on passion as opposed to wars based on a sober assessment of our national security interests, because there's no decision more profound than the one we make to send our brave men and women into harm's way.



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I've thought about these words from time to time since that speech, but never so much as the day I saw that young man and his wife, and understood the degree to which their lives had been turn upside down.

The sacrifices of war are immeasurable. Too many have returned from Iraq with that soldier's story -- with broken bodies and shattered nerves and wounds that even the best care may not heal. Too many of our best have come home shrouded in the flag they loved. Too many moms and dads and husbands and wives have answered that knock on the door that's hardest for any loved one to hear. And the rest of us have seen too many promises of swift victories and dying insurgencies and budding democracy giving way to the reality of a brutal civil war that goes on and on and on to this day.

The sacrifices of war, Mr. President, are immeasurable. It was not impossible to see back then that we might arrive at the place we're at today. I said then that a war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics would lead to a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences. I believed that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale or strong international support would only strengthen the recruitment arm of al-Qaeda and erode the good standing and moral authority that took our country generations to build. There were other experts and leaders and everyday Americans who believed this too.

I wish I had been wrong. I wish we weren't here talking about this at the beginning of the war's fifth year -- because the consequences of this war have been profound. And the sacrifices have been immeasurable.

Mr. President, those who would have us continue this war in perpetuity like to say that this is a matter of resolve on behalf of the American people. But the American people have been extraordinarily resolved. They've seen their sons and daughters killed and wounded on the streets of Fallujah. They've spent hundreds of billions of dollars on this effort -- money that could have been devoted to strengthening our homeland and our competitive standing as a nation.

It is not a failure of resolve that has led us into this chaos but a failed strategy -- a strategy that has only strengthened Iran's strategic position, increased threats posed by terrorist organizations, reduced U.S. credibility and influence around the world, and placed Israel and other nations [friendly] to the United States in the region in greater peril. Iraq has not been a failure of resolve; it has been a failure of strategy, and that strategy must change. It is time to bring a responsible end to U.S. involvement in this conflict is now.

It's become apparent, Mr. President, that there's no military solution to this war. No amount of U.S. soldiers -- not 10,000 more, not 20,000 more, not almost 30,000 more than we know we are sending -- can solve the grievances that lay at the heart of someone else's civil war.



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Our troops cannot serve as their diplomats, and we can no longer referee their civil war. We must begin a phased withdrawal of our forces starting May 1st, with the goal of removing all combat forces by March 30th, 2008.

We also must make sure that we're not as careless getting out of this war as we were getting in, and that's why this withdrawal should be gradual, and maintain some U.S. troops in the region to prevent a wider war in the region, while they can also work on going after Al Qaeda and other terrorists. But this phased withdrawal, Mr. President, must begin soon. Letting the Iraqis know that we will not be there forever is our last, best hope to pressure the Iraqis to take ownership of their country and bring an end to their conflict. It is time for our troops to start coming home.

History will not judge, Mr. President, the architects of this war kindly. But the books have yet to be written on our effort to right the wrongs we see in Iraq. The story has yet to be told about how we turned from this moment, found our way out of the desert, and took to heart the lessons of war that too many refused to heed back then; for it is of little use or comfort to recall past advice and warnings if we do not allow them to guide us in the challenges that lie ahead. Mr. President, threats loom large in an age where terrorist networks thrive, and there will certainly be times when we have to call on our brave servicemen and women to risk their lives again.

But before we make that most profound of all decisions, before we send our best off to battle, we must remember what led us to this day and learn from the principles that follow.

We must remember that ideology is not a foreign policy. We must not embark on a war based on untested theories, political agendas, or wishful thinking that has little basis in fact or reality. We must focus our efforts on the threats we know exist, and we must evaluate those threats with sound intelligence that is never manipulated for political reasons.

Mr. President, we must remember that the cost of going it alone is immense. It is a choice we sometimes have to make, but one that must be made rarely and always reluctantly. That's because America's standing in the world is a precious resource not easily rebuilt. We value the cooperation and goodwill of other nations not because it makes us feel good, but because it makes all the world safer; because the only way to battle 21st century threats that race across the borders -- threats like terror and disease and nuclear proliferation -- is to enlist the resources and support of all nations. To win our wider struggle, we must let people across this planet know that there is another, more hopeful alternative to the hateful ideologies the terrorists espouse and a renewed America will reflect and champion that vision.

Mr. President, we must remember that planning for peace is just as critical as planning for war. Iraq was not just a failure of conception but a failure of execution, and so when a conflict does arise that requires our involvement, we must understand that country's history, its politics, its ethnic and religious divisions before our troops ever set foot on its soil.



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We must understand that setting up ballot boxes does not a democracy make -- that real freedom and real stability come from doing the hard work of helping to build a strong police force, and a legitimate government, and ensuring that people have food, and water, and electricity, and basic services. And we must be honest about how much of that we can do ourselves and how much must come from the people themselves.

Finally, Mr. President, we must remember that when we send our servicemen and women to war, we make sure we give them the training they need, and the equipment that will keep them safe, and a mission that they can accomplish. We must respect our commanders' advice not just when its politically convenient, but even when it's not what we want to hear. And when our troops come home, it is our most solemn responsibility to make sure they come home to the services, and the benefits, and the care they deserve.

As we stand at the beginning of the fifth year of this war, Mr. President, let us remember that young man from Illinois, and his wife, and his daughters, and the thousands upon thousands of families who are living the very real consequences and immeasurable sacrifices that have come from our decision to invade Iraq. We are so blessed in this country to have so many men and women like this -- Americans willing to put on that uniform, and say the hard goodbyes, and risk their lives in a far off land because they know that such consequences and sacrifices are sometimes necessary to defend our country and achieve a lasting peace.

That is why we have no greater responsibility than to ensure the decision to place them in harm's way is the right one. And that is why we must learn the lessons of Iraq. It is what we owe our soldiers. It is what we owe their families. And it is what we owe our country -- now, and all the days and months to come.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.