Leaving Iraq

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

President Obama?s speech in Atlanta announcing he was fulfilling his promise to bring combat operations in Iraq to a close was noteworthy first of all because it showed how thoroughly the political landscape has changed since 2008. In the Democratic primaries, Iraq was a frequent topic of debate, but it has not been on the front pages since. With relative stability in Iraq and relative instability in the U.S. economy, a fickle electorate has moved on.

The Disabled Veterans of America whom Obama addressed yesterday cannot ?move on? as easily as the rest of us. One of the more shameful aspects of contemporary warfare is that so few carry the burden for so many. This was especially the case with the Iraq War: President George W. Bush sent our troops into battle but he neglected to ask the rest of us to even pay for the war effort. You may recall that the average citizen was told to go shopping to strengthen the economy. This disconnect between the experience of our military (and their families) and the rest of the citizenry is a very dangerous phenomenon. For all the undoubted value in having an all-volunteer army, in a democracy, the whole nation should be meaningfully engaged when we go to war.

It is easy to dump on George Bush. He pushed us into a war in Iraq that was a strategic blunder of the first order. Amongst other things, it was obvious to any and all ? and was clearly stated at the time by seasoned military experts like General Wesley Clark ? that the one sure consequence of the downfall of Saddam Hussein would be the strengthening of the even more dangerous regime in Iran. The lead-up to the war in Iraq ? the deceit, the proud predictions that it would be an easy task, that the cost would never, never reach even $100 billion ? was also one of the worst self-inflicted wounds the nation has ever sustained. When the President, Vice President and Secretary of Defense are so wrong, the trust people should have in the conduct of their leaders was harmed as decisively as it was by Watergate.

That said, George Bush adopted the ?surge? strategy, something then-Senator Obama did not support. The surge succeeded in bringing sufficient security to Iraq to allow the U.S withdrawal to proceed. It would have cost Obama nothing to acknowledge this fact. Obama gets credit for not arresting the Bush policy in mid-air despite pressure from his left to cut and run immediately.

More than that, President Obama gets credit for delivering on one of his signature campaign promises. If the Bush administration?s run-up to the war eroded trust in our government, the way to restore the trust of the American people in their political leadership is to deliver on promises. Obama promised a withdrawal from Iraq and he is now delivering on that promise.

Obama has also strengthened his hand in the policy struggle over Afghanistan. Gen. David Petraeus, who engineered the surge in Iraq, is now conducting war operations in Afghanistan, overseeing a similar strategy and one he helped to craft. Petraeus proved prescient in Iraq and we can all hope that he will prove similarly prescient in Afghanistan.

The day the last American soldier leaves Iraq will not be a great day. It will be the best day possible given the string of mistakes that preceded it. It is certainly not the stuff of political popularity. But, the veterans in the audience in Atlanta who applauded the President?s speech, the men and women who paid the price for those mistakes, they know that the day the last American soldier leaves Iraq is a day for which they have hoped for a long time. It will be a very good day. And, they, more than most of us, can appreciate how important is that the President has kept his promise.

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