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A Responsibility to Explain Why Iraq Matters

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President Obama's Oval Office speech was long on statements of resolve. "America intends to sustain and strengthen our leadership," he said. He declared that "there should be no doubt: the Iraqi people will have a strong partner in the United States," adding, "Our combat mission is ending, but our commitment to Iraq's future is not." But the speech was short on why — that is, what America's interests are in making such a commitment.

The speech did not connect developments in Iraq to U.S. national interests. The president spoke extensively of Iraq's interests. He commented that the Iraqis are no longer subject to "a regime that terrorized its people" and that they have interests in preventing civil war, building democracy for themselves, resettling their refugees, etc. But Obama spoke as if the key American interests were withdrawal of U.S. forces and relinquishment of responsibilities. He gave no reason why the United States should continue to exert itself in Iraq as a "strong partner."

When President Obama spoke earlier in the day on August 31 to soldiers at Ft. Bliss, he made a notable acknowledgement that the war in Iraq had contributed to the well-being not only of Iraqis, but Americans too. He said that "because of the extraordinary service that all of you have done, and so many people here at Fort Bliss have done, Iraq has an opportunity to create a better future for itself, *and America is more secure.*"

America is more secure — now that's a reason to remain committed in Iraq. That explains why Americans should not want to lose what was gained.

Strangely, in his primetime Oval Office speech carried on all the television news shows, the president chose to drop the comment that the war has made America more secure. In the corresponding paragraph of that later speech, all the president said was: "Because of our troops and civilians — and because of the resilience of the Iraqi people — Iraq has the opportunity to embrace a new destiny, even though many challenges remain."

Evidently the president is not comfortable admitting that the war has made America more secure. Presumably this is because he repeatedly declared before he became president that the war had made the United States less secure. The president does not quite know what to do with the rather inconvenient truth that the 2007–08 surge strategy worked. In January 2007 he had proposed legislation (“The Iraq War De-escalation Act of 2007”) that would have ended the U.S. war effort in March 2008, before the strategy could produce its success. But now military, political, and economic progress in Iraq has reached a point where President Obama does not believe he can ignore it, is not willing to throw it away, and therefore feels compelled to remain engaged in Iraq as a “strong partner” for the foreseeable future. At the same time, it sticks in his craw to praise — or even just admit — what the war has done to serve U.S. national security interests.

It would have been useful for the president to have used his Ft. Bliss formulation when he gave his oval office speech. If statesmanship trumped politics, he would have observed last evening that the war not only freed the Iraqis from a sadistic tyranny, but it made America more secure in various ways. It removed a regime that threatened aggression throughout its region. It punished a regime that was hostile to the United States and contemptuous of the U.N. Security Council’s formal decisions on disarmament and peace. It demonstrated that a large price is sometimes imposed on regimes that support terrorism and pursue weapons of mass destruction. And it gave the Iraqis an opportunity to create democratic political institutions in their country, an enterprise that might help someday bring about a benign political transformation of the Arab world and the broader Muslim world. Regarding this last point, the French ambassador to Iraq, Boris Boillon, in an interview in *Le Figaro* the day before President Obama’s Iraq speech, made a stunning statement:

Iraq is true laboratory of democracy in the Arab world today. It is there that the future of democracy in the region will play itself out. Iraq could potentially become a political model for its neighbors. And, whether one likes it or not, all this has come about thanks to the American intervention of 2003.

If, of all people, an ambassador of France can make such an admission, the U.S. president should be able to likewise.

I say it would have been useful for the president to have made these points because the commitment he is rightly making in Iraq is not insubstantial, and it will require public support in the United States. Having made the commitment, he has the job of explaining the whys and wherefores to the American people. But the closest he came in his Oval Office speech to an explanation was the following:

Ending this war is not only in Iraq’s interest — it is in our own. The United States has paid a huge

price to put the future of Iraq in the hands of its people. We have sent our young men and women to make enormous sacrifices in Iraq, and spent vast resources abroad at a time of tight budgets at home. We have persevered because of a belief we share with the Iraqi people—a belief that out of the ashes of war, a new beginning could be born in this cradle of civilization.

First here, as noted earlier, President Obama says that “ending the war” is in America’s interest, but he doesn’t say why our future commitment to Iraq serves our interests. Then he notes that America has sacrificed enormously in Iraq—true enough. And finally he states why we have persevered: because of a belief that “out of the ashes of war, a new beginning could be born.” What kind of explanation is that? Even if we ignore the redundancy of the phrase “new beginning,” we are struck by the vacuity of this pronouncement: We persevere because after a war comes a new beginning. That is the only attempt the president made to explain why the United States has persisted in its efforts in Iraq or should persist in the future.

Barack Obama spoke about Iraq with gross irresponsibility before he was president. He has acted on Iraq as president, however, with far greater responsibility. He needs popular support for his Iraq policy, but he’s is not going to be able to sustain it for long if he can’t bring himself to speak about U.S. interests there truthfully, specifically, and lucidly.

— *Douglas J. Feith served as undersecretary of defense for policy from 2001 to 2005.*

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