U.S. Leaving Iraq with All Deliberate Speed

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The U.S. is now planning to remove all its troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. This might mean that one of the most expensive, ill-conceived and destructive chapters in American foreign policy is now coming to a close. The decision to get out of Iraq could not have been an easy one. Fears of a growing Iranian influence in the region or the collapse of the young Iraqi state are legitimate. They are no longer, however, compelling reasons for the U.S. to remain in Iraq. If there was any guarantee, or even strong likelihood, that two, three or even five more years of U.S. involvement in Iraq would ensure that Iran’s influence would not grow in Iraq or that the Iraqi government would be stable and well-functioning, there would be a strong argument for staying in Iraq. The reality, that there is no way to know how much longer, or at what cost, the U.S. would need to stay in Iraq to achieve these goals, means that it is time to get out. More accurately, it means that it has been time to get out for a while.

For most of the time since the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s regime, the argument for staying in Iraq has been that the U.S. was close to achieving a breakthrough that would guarantee the stability of the new government there. This was perhaps true during the first years after Hussein fell, but in recent years it has become a tired argument that could not be proven or refuted and which has led to more loss of life and treasure in Iraq. The Obama administration did not have an easy choice in Iraq, but it finally made the right one. Moreover, if it is the right one today, it was probably the right one two or more years ago.

The decision to withdraw from Iraq has symbolic significance because a war that was started based largely on ideological fervor and grounded in aspirations and hopes, rather than reality, is being brought to a close for the reasons based on realistic policy calculations. The war is too expensive; and it is not at all clear that the U.S. can continue to have an impact in Iraq. These are extremely compelling reasons to bring the troops home from Iraq. This decision is also significant because it is the first major foreign policy decision in recent years that seems, at least in large part, to have been made with an awareness of the need to reduce federal spending. If the war were not so expensive, the argument for leaving would be significantly less compelling.

Critics of Obama have argued that by leaving now, the U.S. is all but turning Iraq over to Iran. The problem with this argument is, first, that it is very difficult to convincingly argue that staying in Iraq would do anything but put off this inevitable outcome. Second, and more importantly, from the time the war was conceived, Iran stood to benefit from moving Iraq from a Sunni-dominated authoritarian regime to a Shia-dominated semi-democracy. The best way to prevent Iran’s growing influence in Iraq would have been to employ another strategy in 2003. It may seem that by finally bringing the war to an end Obama is ripping off the band-aid of a U.S. presence too quickly, although after more than eight years of war this decision can hardly be described as quick or sudden. However, short of an open-ended commitment in Iraq, which the
U.S. cannot afford and does not want, Obama has no other options and probably hasn’t for a while.