

The Surge and the Speech

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The events in Iraq and the relatively quiet response to President Obama's recent speech on the subject suggest, not surprisingly, that Americans are experiencing a relatively acute case of Iraq fatigue. Few Americans who are not directly involved with the war effort seem interested or concerned about the "end" of the war there, but we probably should be paying more attention. The Obama administration has prioritized the war in Afghanistan as their most important foreign policy concern. Other issues such as Iran's nuclear potential, new, renewed and failed peace efforts in the Middle East and a spate of natural disasters from Pakistan to Haiti have knocked Iraq out of the forefronts of the consciousness of those Americans who think about foreign policy, while the still battered economy has made foreign policy feel less important to most Americans.

Nonetheless, the end of U.S. combat operations in Iraq is significant, although it is not really an end. One of the most frustrating aspects of the effort in Iraq was that there was never a good time to leave. The possibility of things getting worse if U.S. troops left was always very real. This empowered those who supported the war as they fell into the all too easy policy trap of believing that success was just around the corner. Almost seven and a half years after the war started, it can still be argued that success is around the corner. However, Obama had at least some of the wisdom to recognize the flawed nature of that argument.

It is still difficult to look at the events today as the "end" of anything. Even as we wind down U.S. combat operations, the 50,000 or so troops remaining in Iraq. The current plan is for all of them to be gone by the end of next year. Whether or not Obama stays with that plan will be a true test of his leadership and judgment. Moreover, it is almost certain that in the coming months if Iraq falls into further chaos, there will be calls from outside and inside Iraq for American troops to come back. Obama must be prepared for that as well.

Obama's speech was met with [stern criticism on the right](#) because Obama did not give credit to President George W. Bush and other leading Republicans for the success of the surge. Obama would have benefited politically by giving Bush credit for the successful surge, but he would have also been taking the easy way out and not recognizing the overarching concern about the surge from the day it started—that it could not guarantee any gains once the surge stopped. This is now the reality that will define the future of U.S. operations in Iraq. If the next few years are peaceful and Iraq further consolidates into a reasonably functioning state, than Obama should give credit where it is due for the surge. However, in the strong likelihood that this does not happen, Obama has to prepare the U.S. for a post-end of combat strategy that will be costly and may make the end of the war in Iraq only aspirational, not concrete. The [ample uncertainty surrounding the future in Iraq](#) is, after all, evidence of the surge's failure, not its success.