America and Iraq: A Surreal Ending to an All Too Real War

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The withdrawal of the remaining combat troops from Iraq this week has is proving to be a somewhat surreal ending to an all too real war. Almost seven and a half years after the war started amidst national and even global protests and outrage, its ending this month is a minor story, receiving far less coverage than the floods in Pakistan, the latest tea party shenanigans or the Obama’s vacations.

The final withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq is being treated like something of a non-story. For years, withdrawing troops from Iraq was a central demand of the anti-war movement, and one of the issues that helped jump start Barack Obama’s presidential campaign back in 2007, but now that it is actually happening, there is little celebration, or even for that matter recognition. The major reason for this, of course, is that few people believe that the war is actually ending anytime soon. This is partially due to the 50,000 American troops which will remain in Iraq. These troops are allegedly non-combat troops, but there has been no clear explanation of what that means, particularly in a context like the current one in Iraq. It seems pretty unlikely that Iraqi insurgents will no longer target American troops because the only ones remaining are non-combatants; and it seems equally unlikely that these troops will retain their non-combat status if these types of attacks continue to occur.

Efforts to reduce the U.S. presence in Iraq and to link efforts to strengthen the nascent Iraqi state and government with asking that government to stand more on its own, should be lauded. They should not, however, be taken for evidence of a genuine end to the war. Final closure on the U.S. experience in Iraq is still some time away. The administration has said that the 50,000 remaining troops will stay in Iraq through the end of 2011. When that happens, we can begin to describe the U.S. role in the war as really over, but much can happen between now and then.

The current troop withdrawal is motivated more by political considerations than by having legitimately accomplished U.S. goals in Iraq. This is one time when political processes and pressures have played positive and useful roles. Staying in Iraq until the goals of the Bush administration will be accomplished would probably require that commitment of one hundred years to which candidate McCain alluded in 2008. This has been a difficult reality to accept, but continuing in Iraq in the hopes that Iraqi stability and democracy is only around the next corner would have been a big mistake.

The difficulty in extracting the U.S. from Iraq is not news. On the contrary, it was one of the major motivations behind the anti-war movement as the Bush administration careened toward war in 2002-2003. Most wars are easier to start than they are to finish; and Iraq
has certainly not proven to be an exception. For this reason, President Obama deserves some credit for his efforts to end the war in Iraq thus far, but the true test for Obama in Iraq will come in the next 18 months.