

Why Obama Institutionalized the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars

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The war in Afghanistan has now gone on for nine full years with no clear end, other than a self-imposed summer 2011 deadline from which the administration has been back pedaling almost since it was set, in sight. Similarly, the end-again-of combat operations in Iraq has left 50,000 American troops there with no clear indication of when they will come home. Ironically, a president whose campaign was initially made possible by substantial support from the anti-war movement, will be responsible not for ending the two wars that he inherited, but for institutionalizing them.

It is not altogether fair to blame President Obama for this. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan both raised genuinely vexing problems for the new administration. While it remains possible that the best of a range of bad options would have been to end both wars and bring almost all the troops home right away, it is far from obvious that this was the right choice or one that was seriously considered by the administration; nor did Obama have any really good options in either Afghanistan or Iraq.

Institutionalizing these wars grew out of a recognition that an approach that sought to simply win both these wars and then get out would have been neither realistic nor relevant to the current situation, but it also reflected a concern, or even fear, about what would have happened if the U.S. had simply walked away from Afghanistan and Iraq and brought the troops home. However, seeking to craft a policy that reflected both these views resulted in an outcome, the real possibility of a more or less permanent American presence in both these countries, which is neither wise nor sustainable.

American politics have been particularly rancorous in recent years. There is wide disagreement, particularly on domestic issues, but it is hard to believe that anybody from Obama's left wing critics to Tea Partiers, or anywhere in between wants to see the U.S. involved indefinitely in two wars where the end isn't really the end, where deadlines for withdrawal are not taken seriously and where neither the goals nor the timetables are clear, but this is precisely where the U.S. now finds itself. The compromise solution which the Obama administration sought to achieve in both Iraq and Afghanistan has created longer term commitments and problems for the U.S. in both countries while not decisively resolving anything.

Obama not only inherited two difficult wars from his predecessor, but he took office at a time when the security challenges to the U.S. were more complex than ever, and when recrafting the U.S. role in the world was of particular import. American involvement in two seemingly endless wars, of course, precludes even any serious discussion about what America's evolving role in the world should be. Repositioning the U.S., thinking

differently about key global challenges, developing strategies for new problems such as climate change, restructuring global finance, or envisioning a U.S. foreign policy that is more modest is extremely difficult when the country is still fighting two wars.

By institutionalizing these wars, the administration has guaranteed that treasure, time and troops will continue to be dedicated to Afghanistan and Iraq for the foreseeable future, thus making it all but impossible to address the other major foreign policy questions facing the country. By the time these wars wind down, the U.S. role in the world may well have changed, but the U.S. will not have driven that process as is essential for our country's future.