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Remarks of Senator Obama: The War We Need to Win

Washington, DC | August 01, 2007

Thank you Lee, for hosting me here at the Wilson Center, and for your leadership of both the 9/11 Commission and the Iraq Study Group. You have been a steady voice of reason in an unsteady time.

Let me also say that my thoughts and prayers are with your colleague, Haleh Esfandiari, and her family. I have made my position known to the Iranian government. It is time for Haleh to be released. It is time for Haleh to come home.



Thanks to the 9/11 Commission, we know that six years ago this week President Bush received a briefing with the headline: "Bin Ladin determined to strike in U.S."

It came during what the Commission called the "summer of threat," when the "system was blinking red" about an impending attack. But despite the briefing, many felt the danger was overseas, a threat to embassies and military installations. The extremism, the resentment, the terrorist training camps, and the killers were in the dark corners of the world, far away from the American homeland.

Then, one bright and beautiful Tuesday morning, they were here.

I was driving to a state legislative hearing in downtown Chicago when I heard the news on my car radio: a plane had hit the World Trade Center. By the time I got to my meeting, the second plane had hit, and we were told to evacuate.

People gathered in the streets and looked up at the sky and the Sears Tower, transformed from a workplace to a target. We feared for our families and our country. We mourned the terrible loss suffered by our fellow citizens. Back at my law office, I watched the images from New York: a plane vanishing into glass and steel; men and women clinging to windowsills, then letting go; tall towers crumbling to dust. It seemed all of the misery and all of the evil in the world were in that rolling black cloud, blocking out the September sun.

What we saw that morning forced us to recognize that in a new world of threats, we are no longer protected by our own power. And what we saw that morning was a challenge to a new generation.

The history of America is one of tragedy turned into triumph. And so a war over secession became an opportunity to set the captives free. An attack on Pearl Harbor led to a wave of freedom rolling across the Atlantic and Pacific. An Iron Curtain was punctured by democratic values, new institutions at home, and strong international partnerships abroad.

After 9/11, our calling was to write a new chapter in the American story. To devise new strategies and build new alliances, to secure our homeland and safeguard our values, and to serve a just cause abroad. We were ready. Americans were united. Friends around the world stood shoulder to shoulder with us. We had the might and moral-suasion that was the legacy of generations of Americans. The tide of history seemed poised to turn, once again, toward hope.

But then everything changed.

We did not finish the job against al Qaeda in Afghanistan. We did not develop new capabilities to defeat a new enemy, or launch a comprehensive strategy to dry up the terrorists' base of support. We did not reaffirm our basic values, or secure our homeland.

Instead, we got a color-coded politics of fear. Patriotism as the possession of one political party. The diplomacy of refusing to talk to other countries. A rigid 20th century ideology that insisted that the 21st century's stateless terrorism could be defeated through the invasion and occupation of a state. A deliberate strategy to misrepresent 9/11 to sell a war against a country that had nothing to do with 9/11.

And so, a little more than a year after that bright September day, I was in the streets of Chicago again, this time speaking at a rally in opposition to war in Iraq. I did not oppose all wars, I said. I was a strong supporter of the war in Afghanistan. But I said I could not support "a dumb war, a rash war" in Iraq. I worried about a " U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences" in the heart of the Muslim world. I pleaded that we "finish the fight with bin Ladin and al Qaeda."

The political winds were blowing in a different direction. The President was determined to go to war. There was just one obstacle: the U.S. Congress. Nine days after I spoke, that obstacle was removed. Congress rubber-stamped the rush to war, giving the President the broad and open-ended authority he uses to this day. With that vote, Congress became co-author of a catastrophic war. And we went off to fight on the wrong battlefield, with no appreciation of how many enemies we would create, and no plan for how to get out.

Because of a war in Iraq that should never have been authorized and should never have been waged, we are now less safe than we were before 9/11.

According to the National Intelligence Estimate, the threat to our homeland from al Qaeda is "persistent and evolving." Iraq is a training ground for terror, torn apart by civil war. Afghanistan is more violent than it has been since 2001. Al Qaeda has a sanctuary in Pakistan. Israel is besieged by emboldened enemies, talking openly of its destruction. Iran is now presenting the broadest strategic challenge to the United States in the Middle East in a generation. Groups affiliated with or inspired by al Qaeda operate worldwide. Six years after 9/11, we are again in the midst of a "summer of threat," with bin Ladin and many more terrorists determined to strike in the United States.

What's more, in the dark halls of Abu Ghraib and the detention cells of Guantanamo, we have compromised our most precious values. What could have been a call to a generation has become an excuse for unchecked presidential power. A tragedy that united us was turned into a political wedge issue used to divide us.

It is time to turn the page. It is time to write a new chapter in our response to 9/11.

Just because the President misrepresents our enemies does not mean we do not have them. The terrorists are at war with us. The threat is from violent extremists who are a small minority of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims, but the threat is real. They distort Islam. They kill man, woman and child; Christian and Hindu, Jew and Muslim. They seek to create a repressive caliphate. To defeat this enemy, we must understand who we are fighting against, and what we are fighting for.

The President would have us believe that every bomb in Baghdad is part of al Qaeda's war against us, not an Iraqi civil war. He elevates al Qaeda in Iraq -- which didn't exist before our invasion -- and overlooks the people who hit us on 9/11, who are training new recruits in Pakistan. He lumps together groups with very different goals: al Qaeda and Iran, Shiite militias and Sunni insurgents. He confuses our mission.

And worse -- he is fighting the war the terrorists want us to fight. Bin Ladin and his allies know they cannot defeat us on the field of battle or in a genuine battle of ideas. But they can provoke the reaction we've seen in Iraq: a misguided invasion of a Muslim country that sparks new insurgencies, ties down our military, busts our budgets, increases the pool of terrorist recruits, alienates America, gives democracy a bad name, and prompts the American people to question our engagement in the world.

By refusing to end the war in Iraq, President Bush is giving the terrorists what they really want, and what the Congress voted to give them in 2002: a U.S. occupation of undetermined

length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences.

It is time to turn the page. When I am President, we will wage the war that has to be won, with a comprehensive strategy with five elements: getting out of Iraq and on to the right battlefield in Afghanistan and Pakistan; developing the capabilities and partnerships we need to take out the terrorists and the world's most deadly weapons; engaging the world to dry up support for terror and extremism; restoring our values; and securing a more resilient homeland.

The first step must be getting off the wrong battlefield in Iraq, and taking the fight to the terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

I introduced a plan in January that would have already started bringing our troops out of Iraq, with a goal of removing all combat brigades by March 31, 2008. If the President continues to veto this plan, then ending this war will be my first priority when I take office.

There is no military solution in Iraq. Only Iraq's leaders can settle the grievances at the heart of Iraq's civil war. We must apply pressure on them to act, and our best leverage is reducing our troop presence. And we must also do the hard and sustained diplomatic work in the region on behalf of peace and stability.

In ending the war, we must act with more wisdom than we started it. That is why my plan would maintain sufficient forces in the region to target al Qaeda within Iraq. But we must recognize that al Qaeda is not the primary source of violence in Iraq, and has little support -- not from Shia and Kurds who al Qaeda has targeted, or Sunni tribes hostile to foreigners. On the contrary, al Qaeda's appeal within Iraq is enhanced by our troop presence.

Ending the war will help isolate al Qaeda and give Iraqis the incentive and opportunity to take them out. It will also allow us to direct badly needed resources to Afghanistan. Our troops have fought valiantly there, but Iraq has deprived them of the support they need -- and deserve. As a result, parts of Afghanistan are falling into the hands of the Taliban, and a mix of terrorism, drugs, and corruption threatens to overwhelm the country.

As President, I would deploy at least two additional brigades to Afghanistan to re-enforce our counter-terrorism operations and support NATO's efforts against the Taliban. As we step up our commitment, our European friends must do the same, and without the burdensome restrictions that have hampered NATO's efforts. We must also put more of an Afghan face on security by improving the training and equipping of the Afghan Army and Police, and including Afghan soldiers in U.S. and NATO operations.

We must not, however, repeat the mistakes of Iraq. The solution in Afghanistan is not just military -- it is political and economic. As President, I would increase our non-military aid by \$1 billion. These resources should fund projects at the local level to impact ordinary Afghans, including the development of alternative livelihoods for poppy farmers. And we must seek better performance from the Afghan government, and support that performance through tough anti-corruption safeguards on aid, and increased international support to develop the rule of law across the country.

Above all, I will send a clear message: we will not repeat the mistake of the past, when we turned our back on Afghanistan following Soviet withdrawal. As 9/11 showed us, the security of Afghanistan and America is shared. And today, that security is most threatened by the al Qaeda and Taliban sanctuary in the tribal regions of northwest Pakistan.

Al Qaeda terrorists train, travel, and maintain global communications in this safe-haven. The Taliban pursues a hit and run strategy, striking in Afghanistan, then skulking across the border to safety.

This is the wild frontier of our globalized world. There are wind-swept deserts and cave-dotted mountains. There are tribes that see borders as nothing more than lines on a map, and governments as forces that come and go. There are blood ties deeper than alliances of convenience, and pockets of extremism that follow religion to violence. It's a tough place.

But that is no excuse. There must be no safe-haven for terrorists who threaten America. We cannot fail to act because action is hard.

As President, I would make the hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. military aid to Pakistan conditional, and I would make our conditions clear: Pakistan must make substantial progress in closing down the training camps, evicting foreign fighters, and preventing the Taliban from using Pakistan as a staging area for attacks in Afghanistan.

I understand that President Musharraf has his own challenges. But let me make this clear.

There are terrorists holed up in those mountains who murdered 3,000 Americans. They are plotting to strike again. It was a terrible mistake to fail to act when we had a chance to take out an al Qaeda leadership meeting in 2005. If we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets and President Musharraf won't act, we will.

And Pakistan needs more than F-16s to combat extremism. As the Pakistani government increases investment in secular education to counter radical madrasas, my Administration will increase America's commitment. We must help Pakistan invest in the provinces along the Afghan border, so that the extremists' program of hate is met with one of hope. And we must not turn a blind eye to elections that are neither free nor fair -- our goal is not simply an ally in Pakistan, it is a democratic ally.

Beyond Pakistan, there is a core of terrorists -- probably in the tens of thousands -- who have made their choice to attack America. So the second step in my strategy will be to build our capacity and our partnerships to track down, capture or kill terrorists around the world, and to deny them the world's most dangerous weapons.

I will not hesitate to use military force to take out terrorists who pose a direct threat to America. This requires a broader set of capabilities, as outlined in the Army and Marine Corps's new counter-insurgency manual. I will ensure that our military becomes more stealth, agile, and lethal in its ability to capture or kill terrorists. We need to recruit, train, and equip our armed forces to better target terrorists, and to help foreign militaries to do the same. This must include a program to bolster our ability to speak different languages, understand different cultures, and coordinate complex missions with our civilian agencies.

To succeed, we must improve our civilian capacity. The finest military in the world is adapting to the challenges of the 21st century. But it cannot counter insurgent and terrorist threats without civilian counterparts who can carry out economic and political reconstruction missions -- sometimes in dangerous places. As President, I will strengthen these civilian capacities, recruiting our best and brightest to take on this challenge. I will increase both the numbers and capabilities of our diplomats, development experts, and other civilians who can work alongside our military. We can't just say there is no military solution to these problems. We need to integrate all aspects of American might.

One component of this integrated approach will be new Mobile Development Teams that bring together personnel from the State Department, the Pentagon, and USAID. These teams will work with civil society and local governments to make an immediate impact in peoples' lives, and to turn the tide against extremism. Where people are most vulnerable, where the light of hope has grown dark, and where we are in a position to make a real difference in advancing security and opportunity -- that is where these teams will go.

I will also strengthen our intelligence. This is about more than an organizational chart. We need leadership that forces our agencies to share information, and leadership that never -- ever -- twists the facts to support bad policies. But we must also build our capacity to better collect and analyze information, and to carry out operations to disrupt terrorist plots and break up terrorist networks.

This cannot just be an American mission. Al Qaeda and its allies operate in nearly 100 countries. The United States cannot steal every secret, penetrate every cell, act on every tip, or track down every terrorist -- nor should we have to do this alone. This is not just about our security. It is about the common security of all the world.

As President, I will create a Shared Security Partnership Program to forge an international intelligence and law enforcement infrastructure to take down terrorist networks from the remote islands of Indonesia, to the sprawling cities of Africa. This program will provide \$5 billion over three years for counter-terrorism cooperation with countries around the world, including information sharing, funding for training, operations, border security, anti-corruption programs, technology, and targeting terrorist financing. And this effort will focus on helping our partners succeed without repressive tactics, because brutality breeds terror, it does not defeat it.

We must also do more to safeguard the world's most dangerous weapons. We know al Qaeda seeks a nuclear weapon. We know they would not hesitate to use one. Yet there is still about 50 tons of highly enriched uranium, some of it poorly secured, at civilian nuclear facilities in over forty countries. There are still about 15,000 to 16,000 nuclear weapons and stockpiles of uranium and plutonium scattered across 11 time zones in the former Soviet Union.

That is why I worked in the Senate with Dick Lugar to pass a law that would help the United States and our allies detect and stop the smuggling of weapons of mass destruction. That is

why I am introducing a bill with Chuck Hagel that seeks to prevent nuclear terrorism, reduce global nuclear arsenals, and stop the spread of nuclear weapons. And that is why, as President, I will lead a global effort to secure all nuclear weapons and material at vulnerable sites within four years. While we work to secure existing stockpiles, we should also negotiate a verifiable global ban on the production of new nuclear weapons material.

And I won't hesitate to use the power of American diplomacy to stop countries from obtaining these weapons or sponsoring terror. The lesson of the Bush years is that not talking does not work. Go down the list of countries we've ignored and see how successful that strategy has been. We haven't talked to Iran, and they continue to build their nuclear program. We haven't talked to Syria, and they continue support for terror. We tried not talking to North Korea, and they now have enough material for 6 to 8 more nuclear weapons.

It's time to turn the page on the diplomacy of tough talk and no action. It's time to turn the page on Washington's conventional wisdom that agreement must be reached before you meet, that talking to other countries is some kind of reward, and that Presidents can only meet with people who will tell them what they want to hear.

President Kennedy said it best: "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate." Only by knowing your adversary can you defeat them or drive wedges between them. As President, I will work with our friend and allies, but I won't outsource our diplomacy in Tehran to the Europeans, or our diplomacy in Pyongyang to the Chinese. I will do the careful preparation needed, and let these countries know where America stands. They will no longer have the excuse of American intransigence. They will have our terms: no support for terror and no nuclear weapons.

But America must be about more than taking out terrorists and locking up weapons, or else new terrorists will rise up to take the place of every one we capture or kill. That is why the third step in my strategy will be drying up the rising well of support for extremism.

When you travel to the world's trouble spots as a United States Senator, much of what you see is from a helicopter. So you look out, with the buzz of the rotor in your ear, maybe a door gunner nearby, and you see the refugee camp in Darfur, the flood near Djibouti, the bombed out block in Baghdad. You see thousands of desperate faces.

Al Qaeda's new recruits come from Africa and Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Many come from disaffected communities and disconnected corners of our interconnected world. And it makes you stop and wonder: when those faces look up at an American helicopter, do they feel hope, or do they feel hate?

We know where extremists thrive. In conflict zones that are incubators of resentment and anarchy. In weak states that cannot control their borders or territory, or meet the basic needs of their people. From Africa to central Asia to the Pacific Rim -- nearly 60 countries stand on the brink of conflict or collapse. The extremists encourage the exploitation of these hopeless places on their hate-filled websites.

And we know what the extremists say about us. America is just an occupying Army in Muslim lands, the shadow of a shrouded figure standing on a box at Abu Ghraib, the power behind the throne of a repressive leader. They say we are at war with Islam. That is the whispered line of the extremist who has nothing to offer in this battle of ideas but blame -- blame America, blame progress, blame Jews. And often he offers something along with the hate. A sense of empowerment. Maybe an education at a madrasa, some charity for your family, some basic services in the neighborhood. And then: a mission and a gun.

We know we are not who they say we are. America is at war with terrorists who killed on our soil. We are not at war with Islam. America is a compassionate nation that wants a better future for all people. The vast majority of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims have no use for bin Ladin or his bankrupt ideas. But too often since 9/11, the extremists have defined us, not the other way around.

When I am President, that will change. We will author our own story.

We do need to stand for democracy. And I will. But democracy is about more than a ballot box. America must show -- through deeds as well as words -- that we stand with those who seek a better life. That child looking up at the helicopter must see America and feel hope.

As President, I will make it a focus of my foreign policy to roll back the tide of hopelessness that gives rise to hate. Freedom must mean freedom from fear, not the freedom of anarchy. I will never shrug my shoulders and say -- as Secretary Rumsfeld did -- "Freedom is untidy." I will focus our support on helping nations build independent judicial systems, honest police

forces, and financial systems that are transparent and accountable. Freedom must also mean freedom from want, not freedom lost to an empty stomach. So I will make poverty reduction a key part of helping other nations reduce anarchy.

I will double our annual investments to meet these challenges to \$50 billion by 2012. And I will support a \$2 billion Global Education Fund to counter the radical madrasas -- often funded by money from within Saudi Arabia -- that have filled young minds with messages of hate. We must work for a world where every child, everywhere, is taught to build and not to destroy. And as we lead we will ask for more from our friends in Europe and Asia as well -- more support for our diplomacy, more support for multilateral peacekeeping, and more support to rebuild societies ravaged by conflict.

I will also launch a program of public diplomacy that is a coordinated effort across my Administration, not a small group of political officials at the State Department explaining a misguided war. We will open "America Houses" in cities across the Islamic world, with Internet, libraries, English lessons, stories of America's Muslims and the strength they add to our country, and vocational programs. Through a new "America's Voice Corps" we will recruit, train, and send out into the field talented young Americans who can speak with -- and listen to -- the people who today hear about us only from our enemies.

As President, I will lead this effort. In the first 100 days of my Administration, I will travel to a major Islamic forum and deliver an address to redefine our struggle. I will make clear that we are not at war with Islam, that we will stand with those who are willing to stand up for their future, and that we need their effort to defeat the prophets of hate and violence. I will speak directly to that child who looks up at that helicopter, and my message will be clear: "You matter to us. Your future is our future. And our moment is now."

This brings me to the fourth step in my strategy: I will make clear that the days of compromising our values are over.

Major General Paul Eaton had a long and distinguished career serving this country. It included training the Iraqi Army. After Abu Ghraib, his senior Iraqi advisor came into his office and said: "You have no idea how this will play out on the streets of Baghdad and the rest of the Arab world. How can this be?" This was not the America he had looked up to.

As the counter-insurgency manual reminds us, we cannot win a war unless we maintain the high ground and keep the people on our side. But because the Administration decided to take the low road, our troops have more enemies. Because the Administration cast aside international norms that reflect American values, we are less able to promote our values. When I am President, America will reject torture without exception. America is the country that stood against that kind of behavior, and we will do so again.

I also will reject a legal framework that does not work. There has been only one conviction at Guantanamo. It was for a guilty plea on material support for terrorism. The sentence was 9 months. There has not been one conviction of a terrorist act. I have faith in America's courts, and I have faith in our JAGs. As President, I will close Guantanamo, reject the Military Commissions Act, and adhere to the Geneva Conventions. Our Constitution and our Uniform Code of Military Justice provide a framework for dealing with the terrorists.

This Administration also puts forward a false choice between the liberties we cherish and the security we demand. I will provide our intelligence and law enforcement agencies with the tools they need to track and take out the terrorists without undermining our Constitution and our freedom.

That means no more illegal wire-tapping of American citizens. No more national security letters to spy on citizens who are not suspected of a crime. No more tracking citizens who do nothing more than protest a misguided war. No more ignoring the law when it is inconvenient. That is not who we are. And it is not what is necessary to defeat the terrorists. The FISA court works. The separation of powers works. Our Constitution works. We will again set an example for the world that the law is not subject to the whims of stubborn rulers, and that justice is not arbitrary.

This Administration acts like violating civil liberties is the way to enhance our security. It is not. There are no short-cuts to protecting America, and that is why the fifth part of my strategy is doing the hard and patient work to secure a more resilient homeland.

Too often this Administration's approach to homeland security has been to scatter money around and avoid hard choices, or to scare Americans without telling them what to be scared of, or what to do. A Department set up to make Americans feel safer didn't even show up when bodies drifted through the streets in New Orleans. That's not acceptable.

My Administration will take an approach to homeland security guided by risk. I will establish a Quadrennial Review at the Department of Homeland Security -- just like at the Pentagon -- to undertake a top to bottom review of the threats we face and our ability to confront them. And I will develop a comprehensive National Infrastructure Protection Plan that draws on both local know-how and national priorities.

We have to put resources where our infrastructure is most vulnerable. That means tough and permanent standards for securing our chemical plants. Improving our capability to screen cargo and investing in safeguards that will prevent the disruption of our ports. And making sure our energy sector -- our refineries and pipelines and power grids -- is protected so that terrorists cannot cripple our economy.

We also have to get past a top-down approach. Folks across America are the ones on the front lines. On 9/11, it was citizens -- empowered by their knowledge of the World Trade Center attacks -- who protected our government by heroically taking action on Flight 93 to keep it from reaching our nation's capital. When I have information that can empower Americans, I will share it with them.

Information sharing with state and local governments must be a two-way street, because we never know where the two pieces of the puzzle are that might fit together -- the tip from Afghanistan, and the cop who sees something suspicious on Michigan Avenue. I will increase funding to help train police to gather information and connect it to the intelligence they receive from the federal government. I will address the problem in our prisons, where the most disaffected and disconnected Americans are being explicitly targeted for conversion by al Qaeda and its ideological allies.

And my Administration will not permit more lives to be lost because emergency responders are not outfitted with the communications capability and protective equipment their job requires, or because the federal government is too slow to respond when disaster strikes. We've been through that on 9/11. We've been through it during Katrina. I will ensure that we have the resources and competent federal leadership we need to support our communities when American lives are at stake.

But this effort can't just be about what we ask of our men and women in uniform. It can't just be about how we spend our time or our money.

It's about the kind of country we are.

We are in the early stages of a long struggle. Yet since 9/11, we've heard a lot about what America can't do or shouldn't do or won't even try. We can't vote against a misguided war in Iraq because that would make us look weak, or talk to other countries because that would be a reward. We can't reach out to the hundreds of millions of Muslims who reject terror because we worry they hate us. We can't protect the homeland because there are too many targets, or secure our people while staying true to our values. We can't get past the America of Red and Blue, the politics of who's up and who's down.

That is not the America that I know.

The America I know is the last, best hope for that child looking up at a helicopter. It's the country that put a man on the moon; that defeated fascism and helped rebuild Europe. It's a country whose strength abroad is measured not just by armies, but rather by the power of our ideals, and by our purpose to forge an ever more perfect union at home.

That's the America I know. We just have to act like it again to write that next chapter in the American story. If we do, we can keep America safe while extending security and opportunity around the world. We can hold true to our values, and in doing so advance those values abroad. And we can be what that child looking up at a helicopter needs us to be: the relentless opponent of terror and tyranny, and the light of hope to the world.

To make this story reality, it's going to take Americans coming together and changing the fundamental direction of this country. It's going to take the service of a new generation of young people. It's going to take facing tragedy head-on and turning it into the next generation's triumph. That is a challenge that I welcome. Because when we do make that change, we'll do more than win a war -- we'll live up to that calling to make America, and the world, safer, freer, and more hopeful than we found it.

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